One mild, overcast day in August 1969 a bus came winding its way along a narrow road at the far end of an island in southern Norway, between gardens and rocks, meadows and woods, up and down dale, round sharp bends, sometimes with trees on both sides as if through a tunnel, sometimes with the sea straight ahead. It belonged to the Arendal Steamship Company and was, like all its buses, painted in two-tone light and dark brown livery. It drove over a bridge, along a bay, indicated right and drew to a halt. The door opened and out stepped a little family. The father, a tall slim man in a white shirt and light terylene trousers, was carrying two suitcases. The mother, wearing a beige coat and with a light blue kerchief covering her long hair, was clutching a pram in one hand and holding the hand of a small boy in the other. The oily grey exhaust fumes from the bus hung in the air for a moment as it receded into the distance.

'It's quite a way to walk,' the father said.

'Can you manage, Yngve?' the mother said, looking down at the boy, who nodded.

'Course I can.'

He was four and a half years old and had fair, almost white hair and tanned skin after a long summer in the sun. His brother, barely eight months old, lay in the pram staring up at the sky, oblivious to where they were or where they were going.

Slowly they began to walk uphill. It was a gravel road, covered with puddles of varying sizes after a downpour. There were fields on both sides. At the end of a flat stretch, perhaps some five hundred metres in length, there was a forest which sloped down to pebbled beaches; the trees weren't tall, as though they had been flattened by the wind blowing off the sea.

On the right there was a newly built house. Otherwise there were no buildings to be seen. The large springs on the pram creaked. Soon the baby closed his eyes, lulled to sleep by the wonderful rocking motion. The father, who had short dark hair and a thick black beard, put down one suitcase to wipe the sweat from his brow.

'My God, it's humid,' he said.

'Yes,' she replied. 'But it might be cooler nearer the sea.'

'Let's hope so,' he said, grabbing the suitcase again.

This altogether ordinary family, with young parents, as indeed almost all parents were in those days, and two children, as indeed almost every family had in those days, had moved from Oslo, where they had lived in Thereses gate close to Bislett Stadium for five years, to the island of Tromøya, where a new house was being built for them on an estate. While they were waiting for the house to be completed, they would rent an old property in Hove Holiday Centre. In Oslo he had studied English and Norwegian during the day and worked as a nightwatchman, while she attended Ullevål Nursing College. Even though he hadn't finished the course, he had applied – and had been accepted – for a middle-school teaching job at Roligheden Skole while she was to work at Kokkeplassen Psychiatric Clinic. They had met in Kristiansand when they were seventeen, she had become pregnant when they were nineteen and they had married when they were twenty, on the Vestland smallholding where she had grown up. No one from his family went to the wedding,

and even though he is smiling on all the photos there is an aura of loneliness around him, you can see he doesn't quite belong among all her brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts, male and female cousins.

Now they're twenty-four and their real lives lie before them. Jobs of their own, a house of their own, children of their own. There are the two of them, and the future they are moving into is theirs too.

Or is it?

They were born in the same year, 1944, and were part of the first post-war generation, which in many ways represented something new, not least by dint of their being the first people in this country to live in a society that was, to a major degree, planned. The 1950s were the time for the growth of systems – the school system, the health system, the social system, the transport system – and public departments and services too, in a large-scale centralisation that in the course of a surprisingly short period would transform the way lives were led. Her father, born at the beginning of the twentieth century, came from the farm where she grew up, in Sørbøvåg in the district of Ytre Sogn, and had no education. Her grandfather came from one of the outlying islands off the coast, as his father, and his before him, probably had. Her mother came from a farm in Jølster, a hundred kilometres away, she hadn't had any education either, and her family there could be traced back to the sixteenth century. As regards his family, it was higher up the social scale, inasmuch as both his father and his uncles on his father's side had received higher education. But they, too, lived in the same place as their parents, Kristiansand, that is. His mother, who was uneducated, came from Åsgårdstrand, her father was a ship's pilot, and there were also police officers in her family. When she met her husband she moved with him to his home town. That was the custom.

The change that took place in the 1950s and 1960s was a revolution, only without the usual violence and irrationality of revolutions. Not only did children of fishermen and smallholders, factory workers and shop assistants start at university and train to become teachers and psychologists, historians and social workers, but many of them settled in places far from the areas where their families lived. That they did all this as a matter of course says something about the strength of the zeitgeist. Zeitgeist comes from the outside, but works on the inside. It affects everyone, but not everyone is affected in the same way. For the young 1960s mother it would have been an absurd thought to marry a man from one of the neighbouring farms and spend the rest of her life there. She wanted to get out! She wanted to have her *own* life. The same was true for her brothers and sisters, and that was how it was in families countrywide. But why did they want to do that? Where did this strong desire come from? Indeed, where did *these new ideas* come from? In her family there was no tradition of anything of this kind: the only person who had left the area was her Uncle Magnus, and he had gone to America because of the poverty in Norway, and the life he had there was for many years hardly distinguishable from the life he'd had in Vestland. For the young 1960s father things were different: in his family you were expected to have an education, though perhaps not to marry a Vestland farmer's daughter and settle on an estate near a small Sørland town.

But there they were, walking on this hot overcast day in August 1969, on their way to their new home, him lugging two heavy suitcases stuffed with 1960s clothes, her pushing a 1960s pram with a baby dressed in 1960s baby togs, white with lace trimmings everywhere, and between them, tripping from side to side, happy and curious, excited and expectant, was their elder son, Yngve. Across the flat stretch they went, through the thin

strip of forest, to the gate that was open and into the large holiday centre. To the right, there was a garage owned by someone called Vraaldsen; to the left, large red chalets around an open gravel area and, beyond, pine forest.

A kilometre to the east stood Tromøya Church, built in 1150 of stone, but some parts were older and it was probably one of the oldest churches in the country. It stood on a small mound and had been used from time immemorial as a landmark by passing ships and was charted on all nautical maps. On Mærdø, a little island in the archipelago off the coast, there was an old *skippergård*, a residence testifying to the locality's golden age, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when trade with the rest of the world, particularly in timber, flourished. On school trips to the Aust-Agder Museum classes were shown old Dutch and Chinese artefacts going back to that time and even further. On Tromøya there were rare and exotic plants which had come with ships discharging their ballast water, and you learned at school that it was on Tromøya that potatoes were first grown in Norway. In Snorri's Norwegian king sagas the island was mentioned several times; under the ground in the meadows and fields lay arrowheads from the Stone Age and you could find fossils among the round stones on the long pebbled beaches.

However, as the incoming nuclear family slowly walked through the open countryside with all their bags and baggage it wasn't the tenth or the thirteenth, the seventeenth or the nineteenth centuries that had left their mark on the surroundings. It was the Second World War. This region had been used by German forces; they had built the barracks and many of the houses. In the forest there were low-lying brick bunkers, completely intact, and on top of the slopes above the beaches several artillery emplacements. There was even an old German airfield in the vicinity.

The house where they were going to live during the coming year was a solitary construction in the middle of the forest. It was red with white window frames. From the sea, which could not be seen though only a few hundred metres down the slope, came a regular crashing of waves. There was a smell of forest and salt water.

The father put down his suitcases, took out the key and unlocked the door. Inside there was a hall, a kitchen, a living room with a wood burner, a combined bath and washroom, and on the first floor three bedrooms. The walls weren't insulated; the kitchen was equipped with the minimum. No telephone, no dishwasher, no washing machine, no TV.

'Well, here we are then,' the father said, carrying their suitcases into the bedroom while Yngve ran from window to window peering out and the mother stood the pram with the sleeping baby on the doorstep.

Of course I don't remember any of this time. It is absolutely impossible to identify with the infant my parents photographed, indeed so impossible that it seems wrong to use the word 'me' to describe what is lying on the changing table, for example, with unusually red skin, arms and legs spread and a face distorted into a scream, the cause of which no one can remember, or on a sheepskin rug on the floor, wearing white pyjamas, still red-faced, with large dark eyes squinting slightly. Is this creature the same person as the one sitting here in Malmö writing? And will the forty-year-old creature who is sitting in Malmö writing on this overcast September day in a room filled with the drone of the traffic outside and the autumn wind howling through the old-fashioned ventilation system be the same as the grey hunched geriatric who in forty years from now might be sitting dribbling and trembling in an old people's home somewhere in

the Swedish woods? Not to mention the corpse that at some point will be laid out on a bench in a morgue? Still known as Karl Ove. And isn't it actually unbelievable that one simple name encompasses all of this? The foetus in the belly, the infant on the changing table, the forty-year-old in front of the computer, the old man in the chair, the corpse on the bench? Wouldn't it be more natural to operate with several names since their identities and self-perceptions are so very different? Such that the foetus might be called Jens Ove, for example, and the infant Nils Ove, and the five- to ten-year-old Per Ove, the ten- to twelve-year-old Geir Ove, the thirteen- to seventeen-year-old Kurt Ove, the seventeen- to twenty-three-year-old John Ove, the twenty-three- to thirty-two-year-old Tor Ove, the thirty-two to forty-six-year-old Karl Ove – and so on and so forth? Then the first name would represent the distinctiveness of the age range, the middle name would represent continuity and the last family affiliation.

No, I don't remember any of this, I don't even know which house we lived in, even though dad pointed it out to me once. All I know about that time I have been told by my parents or have gleaned from photos. That winter the snow was several metres high, the way it can be in Sørland, and the road to the house was like a narrow ravine. There Yngve is, pulling a cart with me in the back, there he is, with his short skis on, smiling at the photographer. Inside the house, he is pointing at me and laughing, or I am standing on my own holding on to the cot. I called him 'Aua'; that was my first word. He was also the only person who understood what I said, according to what I have been told, and he translated it for mum and dad. I also know that Yngve went around ringing doorbells and asked if there were any children living there. Grandma always used to tell that story. 'Are there any children living here?' she said in a child's voice and laughed. And I know I fell down the stairs, and suffered

some kind of shock, I stopped breathing, went blue in the face and had convulsions, mum ran to the nearest house with a telephone, clutching me to her breast. She thought it was epilepsy, but it wasn't, it was nothing. And I know that dad thrived in the classroom, he was a good teacher, and that during one of these years he went on a trip into the mountains with his class. There are some photos from then, he looks young and happy in all of them, surrounded by teenagers dressed in the casual way that was characteristic of the early 1970s. Woollen jumpers, flared trousers, rubber boots. Their hair was big, not big and piled up as in the 1960s, but big and soft and it hung over their soft teenage faces. Mum once said perhaps he had never been as happy as he was during those years. And then there are photos of grandma on dad's side, Yngve and me – two taken in front of a frozen lake, both Yngve and I were clad in large woollen jackets, knitted by grandma, mine mustard-yellow and brown – and two taken on the veranda of their house in Kristiansand, in one she has her cheek against mine, it is autumn, the sky is blue, the sun low, we are gazing across the town, I suppose I must have been two or three years old.

One might imagine that these photos represent some kind of memory, that they are reminiscences, except that the 'me' reminiscences usually rely on is not there, and the question is then of course what meaning they actually have. I have seen countless photos from the same period of friends' and girlfriends' families, and they are virtually indistinguishable. The same colours, the same clothes, the same rooms, the same activities. But I don't attach any significance to these photos, in a certain sense they are meaningless, and this aspect becomes even more marked when I see photos of previous generations, it is just a collection of people, dressed in exotic clothes, doing something which to me is unfathomable. It is the era that we take photos of, not the

people in it, they can't be captured. Not even the people in my immediate circle can. Who was the woman posing in front of the stove in the flat in Thereses gate, wearing a light blue dress, one knee resting against the other, calves apart, in this typical 1960s posture? The one with the bob? The blue eyes and the gentle smile that was so gentle it barely even registered as a smile? The one holding the handle of the shiny coffee pot with the red lid? Yes, that was my mother, my very own mum, but who was she? What was she thinking? How did she see her life, the one she had lived so far and the one awaiting her? Only she knows, and the photo tells you nothing. An unknown woman in an unknown room, that is all. And the man who, ten years later, is sitting on a mountainside drinking coffee from the same red Thermos top, as he forgot to pack any cups before leaving, who was he? The one with the well-groomed black beard and the thick black hair? The one with the sensitive lips and the amused eyes? Yes, of course, that was my father, my very own dad. But who he was to himself at this moment, or at any other, nobody knows. And so it is with all these photos, even the ones of me. They are voids; the only meaning that can be derived from them is that which time has added. Nonetheless, these photos are a part of me and my most intimate history, as others' photos are part of theirs. Meaningful, meaningless, meaningful, meaningless, this is the wave that washes through our lives and creates its inherent tension. I draw on everything I remember from the first six years of my life, and all that exists in terms of photos and objects from that period, they constitute an important part of my identity, filling the otherwise empty and memory-less periphery of this 'me' with meaning and continuity. From all these bits and pieces I have built myself a Karl Ove, an Yngve, a mum and dad, a house in Hove and a house in Tybakken, a grandmother and grandfather on my dad's side, and a

grandmother and grandfather on my mum's side, a neighbourhood and a multitude of kids.

This ghetto-like state of incompleteness is what I call my childhood.

Memory is not a reliable quantity in life. And it isn't for the simple reason that memory doesn't prioritise the truth. It is never the demand for truth that determines whether memory recalls an action accurately or not. It is self-interest which does. Memory is pragmatic, it is sly and artful, but not in any hostile or malicious way; on the contrary, it does everything it can to keep its host satisfied. Something pushes a memory into the great void of oblivion, something distorts it beyond recognition, something misunderstands it totally, something, and this something is as good as nothing, recalls it with sharpness, clarity and accuracy. That which is remembered accurately is never given to you to determine.

In my case, any memory of my first six years is virtually non-existent. I remember hardly anything. I have no idea who took care of me, what I did, who I played with, it has all completely gone, the years 1969–1974 are a great big hole in my life. The little I can muster is of scant value: I am standing on a wooden bridge in a sparse high-altitude forest, beneath me rushes a torrent, the water is green and white, I am jumping up and down, the bridge is swaying and I am laughing. Beside me is Geir Prestbakmo, a boy from the neighbourhood, he is jumping up and down and laughing too. I am sitting on the rear seat of a car, we are waiting at the lights, dad turns and says we are in Mjøndalen. We are going to an IK Start game, I've been told, but I can't remember a thing about the trip there, the football match or the journey home. I am walking up the hill outside the house pushing a big plastic lorry; it is green and yellow and gives me

an absolutely fantastic feeling of riches and wealth and happiness.

That is all. That is my first six years.

But these are canonised memories, already established at the age of seven or eight, the magic of childhood: my very first memories! However, there are other kinds of memories. Those which are not fixed and cannot be evoked by will, but which at odd moments let go, as it were, and rise into my consciousness of their own accord and float around there for a while like transparent jellyfish, roused by a certain smell, a certain taste, a certain sound . . . these are always accompanied by an immediate, intense feeling of happiness. Then there are the memories associated with the body, when you do something you used to do: shield your eyes from the sun with your arm, catch a ball, run across a meadow with a kite in your hand and your children hard on your heels. There are memories that accompany emotions: sudden anger, sudden tears, sudden fear, and you are where you were, as if hurled back inside yourself, propelled through the ages at breakneck speed. And then there are the memories associated with a landscape, for landscape in childhood is not like the landscape that follows later; they are charged in very different ways. In that landscape every rock, every tree had a meaning, and because everything was seen for the first time and because it was seen so many times, it was anchored in the depths of your consciousness, not as something vague or approximate, the way the landscape outside a house appears to an adult if they close their eyes and it has to be summoned forth, but as something with immense precision and detail. In my mind I have only to open the door and go outside for the images to come streaming towards me. The shingle in the driveway, almost bluish in colour in the summer. Oh, that alone, the driveways of childhood! And the 1970s cars parked in them!

VW Beetles, Citroën DS 21s, Ford Taunuses, Granadas, Consuls, Opel Asconas, Kadetts, Ladas, Volvo Amazons . . . Well, OK, across the shingle, along the brown fence, over the shallow ditch between our road, Nordåsen Ringvei, and Elgstien, which traversed the whole area passing two estates apart from our own. The slope of rich dark earth from the edge of the road down into the forest! The way small, thin, green stems had almost immediately begun to shoot up from it: fragile and seemingly alone in the new black expanse, and then the rampant multiplication of them the year after until the slope was completely covered with thick, luxuriant shrubbery. Small trees, grass, foxgloves, dandelions, ferns and bushes eradicating what earlier had been such a clear division between road and forest. Up the hill, along the pavement with its narrow brick kerb, and, oh, the water that trickled and flowed and streamed down there when it rained! The path off to the right, a short cut to the new supermarket B-Max. The bog beside it, no bigger than two spaces in a car park, the birches thirstily hanging over it. Olsen's house at the top of the little hill and the road that cut in behind. Grevlingveien it was called. In the first house on the left lived John and his sister Trude, it stood on a plot that was little more than a pile of rocks. I was always frightened when I had to walk past that house. Partly because John might be lying in ambush there, ready to throw stones or snowballs at any passing child, partly because they had an Alsatian . . . That Alsatian . . . Oh, now I remember it. What a dreadful beast that dog was. It was tied up on the veranda or in the drive, barked at all the passers-by, slunk back and forth as far as its tether would allow, whimpering and howling. It was lean with yellow sickly eyes. Once it came tearing down the hill towards me, with Trude hard on its heels and the leash dragging behind it. I had heard that you shouldn't take flight when an animal is after you, for

example a bear in the forest; the secret was to stand perfectly still and act cool, so I did, stopping the instant I saw it bounding towards me. It didn't help a scrap. It couldn't care less whether I was motionless or not, just opened its jaws and sank them into my forearm, next to my wrist. Trude caught up with it a second later, grabbed the leash and yanked so hard it was wrenched backwards. I hurried off, crying. Everything about that animal frightened me. The barking, the yellow eyes, the saliva that ran from its jowls, the round pointed teeth, of which I now had an imprint in my arm. At home I didn't breathe a word about what had happened, for fear of being told off, because an incident like this offered so many opportunities for reproach: I shouldn't have been where I was at the time, or I shouldn't have whined or, a dog, was that any reason to be frightened? From that day on terror had me in its grip whenever I saw the brute. And it was fatal because not only had I heard that you should stand still when a dangerous animal attacks, I had also heard that a dog can smell fear. I don't know who told me that, but it was one of the beliefs that people passed on and which everyone knew: dogs can smell if you are frightened. Then they can become frightened or aggressive themselves and go on the attack. If you're not afraid they are nice to you.

How that occupied my mind. How could they *smell* fear? What did fear *smell* of? And was it possible to pretend you weren't frightened, so that the dogs would smell that and wouldn't notice the *real* feelings that lay beneath?

Kanestrøm, who lived two houses up from us, also had a dog. It was a golden retriever called Alex and as meek as a lamb. It ambled after herr Kanestrøm wherever he went, but also after every one of the four children if it could. Kind eyes and, somehow, gentle, friendly movements. But I was even afraid of this one. Because when you came into view on the hill and were about

to go in to ring the doorbell it barked. Not tentative, friendly or inquisitive barking, but vigorous, deep-throated and resonant. Then I stopped in my tracks.

'Hi, Alex,' I might say if no one was around. 'I'm not frightened, you know. It's not that.'

If someone was there I would feel forced to carry on, act as if nothing was happening, plough my way through the barking, as it were, and when it was in front of me, its jaws agape, I bent down and patted it a couple of times on its side with my heart pounding and every muscle trembling with fear.

'Quiet, Alex!' Dag Lothar would say, as he came running up the narrow gravel path from the cellar door or rushing from the front door.

'You're frightening Karl Ove with your barking, you stupid dog.'

'I'm not frightened,' I countered. Dag Lothar just looked at me with a kind of stiff smile, which meant 'Don't give me that.'

Then off we went.

Where did we go?

Into the forest.

Down to Ubekilen, to a bay.

Down to the pontoons.

Up to Tromøya Bridge.

Down to Gamle Tybakken.

Over to the plastic boat factory.

Up into the hills.

Along to Lake Tjenna.

Up to B-Max.

Down to the Fina petrol station.

Unless, that is, we just ran about in the road where we lived, or hung around outside one of the houses there, or sat on the kerb, or in the big cherry tree no one owned.

That was everything. That was the world.
But what a world!

An estate has no roots in the past, nor any branches into the skies of the future, as satellite towns once had. Estates arrived as a pragmatic answer to a practical question, where are all the people moving into the district going to live, ah yes, in the forest over there, we'll clear some plots and put them up for sale. The only house there belonged to a family called Beck; the father was Danish and had built the house himself in the middle of the forest. They didn't have a car, nor a washing machine, nor a television. There was no garden, only a drive made from pounded soil in among the trees. Piles of wood under tarpaulins and, in the winter, an upturned boat. The two sisters, Inga Lill and Lisa, went to the local middle school and looked after Yngve and me for the first years we lived there. Their brother was called John, he was two years older than me, wore strange home-made clothes, wasn't in the slightest bit interested in what we were interested in and devoted his attention to other matters, which he never told us about. He built his own boat when he was twelve. Not like us, not like the rafts we tried to cobble together from dreams and a lust for adventure, but a proper, real rowing boat. You would have thought he would be bullied, but he wasn't, in a way the distance was too great. He wasn't one of us and he didn't want to be. His father, the cycling Dane, who perhaps had nurtured an urge to live alone in the middle of the forest ever since his time in Denmark, must have been mortified when the plans for the estate were drawn up and approved and the first construction machinery rolled into the forest just beyond his house. The families who moved in were from all over the country and all of them had children. In the house across the road lived Gustavsen, he was a fireman, she was a housewife, they came

from Honningsvåg, their children were called Rolf and Leif Tore. In the house opposite us lived Prestbakmo, he was a schoolteacher, she was a nurse, they came from Troms, their children's names were Gro and Geir. On the same side was Kanestrøm, he worked at the Post Office, she was a housewife, they came from Kristiansund, their children were called Steinar, Ingrid Anne, Dag Lothar and Unni. On the other side was Karlsen, he was a sailor, she was a shop assistant, they were from Sørland, their children were Kent Arne and Anne Lene. Above them was Christensen, he was a sailor, I don't know what she did, their children were called Marianne and Eva. On the other side lived Jacobsen, he was a typographer, she was a housewife, both were from Bergen, their children were Geir, Trond and Wenche. Above them, Lindland, from Sørland, their children were Geir Håkon and Morten. Around there I began to lose track, at least as far as the parents' names and jobs were concerned. The children there were: Bente, Tone Elisabeth, Tone, Liv Berit, Steinar, Kåre, Rune, Jan Atle, Oddlaug and Halvor. Most were my age, the oldest seven years above me, the youngest four years below. Five of them would later be in my class.

We moved there in the summer of 1970, when most of the houses on the site were still being built. The shrill warning siren, which sounded before an explosion, was a common feature of my childhood, and that very distinctive feeling of doom you can experience when the shock waves from the explosion ripple through the ground causing the floor of the house to tremble was common too. It was natural to think of connections above the ground – roads, electric cables, forests and seas – but more disturbing to think of them being beneath the ground as well. What we stood on, shouldn't that be absolutely immovable and impenetrable? At the same time all the openings in the ground

had a very special fascination for me and the other children I grew up with. It was not uncommon for us to flock around one of the many holes being dug in our area, whether for sewage pipes or electric cables, or for the foundations of a cellar, and to stare down into the depths, yellow where there was sand, black, brown or reddish brown where there was soil, grey where there was clay, and sooner or later the bottom was always covered with an opaque layer of greyish-yellow water, its surface sometimes broken by the top of a huge rock or two. Above the hole towered a shiny yellow or orange excavator, not unlike a bird, with its bucket like a beak at the extreme end of a long neck, and beside it a stationary lorry, with headlights like eyes, the radiator grille like a mouth and the tarpaulin-covered rear, a back. In the case of large construction projects there would also be bulldozers or dumper trucks, usually yellow, with enormous wheels and tread that was a hand's width. If we were lucky we would find piles of detonation cord in or near the hole, which we pinched because the cord had a high swap and utility value. Besides this, there were normally drums nearby, the height of a man, wooden bobbin-like constructions from which cables were unfurled, and piles of smooth reddish-brown plastic pipes measuring the approximate diameter of our forearms. There were further piles of cement pipes and pre-cast cement wells, so rough and wonderful, a bit taller than us, perfect for climbing on; long immovable mats of old cut-up car tyres, which they used during the blasting; mounds of wooden telephone poles, green from the preservative they had been impregnated with; boxes of dynamite; sheds where the workmen changed their clothes and ate. If they were there we kept a respectful distance and watched what they were doing. If they weren't, we clambered down the holes, onto the dumper truck wheels, balanced on the piles of pipes, rattled the shed doors and peered through the

windows, jumped down into the cement wells, tried to roll the drums away, filled our pockets with cable clippings, plastic handles and detonation cord. In our world no one had greater status than these workmen; no work seemed more meaningful than theirs. The technical details were of no interest to me, they meant as little as the make of the construction machines. What fascinated me most, apart from the changes in the landscape they wrought, were the manifestations of their private lives that came with them. When they produced a comb from their orange overalls or baggy, almost shapeless, blue trousers and combed their hair, safety helmet under their arm, amid all the droning and pounding of their machines, for example, or the mysterious, indeed almost incomprehensible, moment when they emerged from the shed in the afternoon wearing absolutely normal clothes and got into their cars and drove off like absolutely normal men.

There were other workmen we watched closely, indefatigably. If anyone from Televerket appeared in the vicinity, the news spread like wildfire among the groups of children. There was the car, there was the workman, a telecom engineer, and there were his FANTASTIC climber shoes! With those on his feet and a tool belt around his waist he clicked a harness that went round both him and the pole, and then with a series of slow and deliberate but for us COMPLETELY incomprehensible movements he began to mount the pole. How was this POSSIBLE? Straight-backed, with no visible sign of effort, no visible use of force, he GLIDED up to the top. Wide-eyed, we stared at him while he worked aloft. Not one of us would leave because soon he would be climbing down again, in the same easy, effortless, incomprehensible way. Imagine having shoes like those, with the curved metal hook that wrapped itself around the post, what couldn't you do?

And then there were the men working on the drainage. The ones who parked their cars by one of the many manhole covers in the road, which were either set in the tarmac or placed on top of a brick circle somewhere close by, and who after putting on rubber boots reaching up to their WAISTS!, levered up the round, enormously heavy, metal lid with a crowbar, shifted it to the side and climbed down. We watched as first their calves disappeared from view, into the hole under the road, next their thighs, then their stomachs, then their chests and finally their heads . . . And what was there beneath if not a tunnel? Where water flowed? Where you could walk? Oh, this was just brilliant. Perhaps he was over there now, beside Kent Arne's bike, which lay strewn across the pavement, about twenty metres away, except that he was *under* the ground! Or were these manholes a kind of station, like wells, where you could inspect the pipes and draw water when there was a fire? No one knew; we were always told to keep our distance when they climbed down. No one dared ask them. No one was strong enough to lift off the heavy coin-shaped metal covers on their own. So it remained a mystery, like so much else in those years.

Even before we started school we were free to roam wherever we wanted, with two exceptions. One was the main road, which ran from Tromøya Bridge to the Fina station. The other was the lake. Never go down to the lake on your own! the adults instilled in us. But, actually, why not? Did they think we would fall into the water? No, that wasn't it, someone said when we were sitting on the rocks beyond the little meadow where we sometimes played football and looking down over the edge of the steep face into the water, perhaps thirty metres beneath us. It was the water sprite. It abducted children.

'Who says so?'

'Mum and dad.'

'Is it *here*?'

'Yes.'

We gazed down at the greyish surface of the water in Ubekilen. It didn't seem improbable that there was something lurking beneath.

'Only here?' someone asked. 'If so, we can go somewhere else. Lake Tjenna?'

'Or Little Hawaii?'

'There are other sprites there. They're dangerous. It's true. Mum and dad told me. They kidnap children and drown them.'

'Could it come up here?'

'Dunno. No, I don't reckon so. No. It's too far. It's only dangerous by the water's edge.'

I was scared of the sprite after that, but not as scared as I was of foxes, the thought of them terrified me, and if I saw a bush stir or I heard something rustle past, then I was off, running to safety, to an opening in the forest that is, or up to the estate, where the foxes never ventured. In fact, I was so frightened of foxes that Yngve only had to say I am a fox, and I am coming to get you – he was in the upper bunk and I was in the lower one – and I froze in terror. No, you aren't, I said. Yes, I am, he said, hanging over the edge and hitting out at me. Despite this and even though he did frighten me now and then, I missed having him there when we each had our own room and suddenly I had to sleep alone. It was okay, after all, it was *inside* the house, the new room, but it wasn't as good as having him there, in the bunk above me. Then I could just ask him things, such as, 'Yngve, are you frightened now?' and he might answer 'No-oo, why should I be? There's nothing to be frightened of here.' And I would know he was right and feel reassured.

The fear of foxes must have worn off when I was about seven. The vacuum it left, however, was soon filled by other fears. One

morning I was walking past the TV, it was on although no one was watching, there was a matinee film, and there, oh no, oh no, there was a man with no head walking up a staircase! Aaagh! I ran into my room, but that didn't help, I was just as alone and defenceless there, so off I went in search of mum, if she was at home, or Yngve. The image of the headless man pursued me, and not just in the night, which the other fearful visions I had did. No, the headless man could appear in broad daylight, and if I was alone it made no difference that the sun was shining or the birds were singing, my heart pounded and fear spread like fire to every tiniest nerve end in my body. It upset me more that this darkness could also appear in the daylight. In fact, if there was one thing I was really frightened of, it was this darkness in the light. And the worst of it was that there was nothing I could do about it. Shouting for someone didn't help, standing in the middle of an open area didn't help and running away didn't help. Then there was the front cover of a crime magazine that dad once showed me, a comic he'd had when he was a child, showing a skeleton carrying a man over its back, and the skeleton had turned its head and was looking straight at me through its hollow eye sockets. I was afraid of that skeleton as well; it too appeared in all sorts of expected and unexpected contexts. I was also afraid of the hot water in the bathroom. Because whenever you turned on the hot tap a shrill scream travelled through the pipes, and immediately afterwards, if you didn't turn it off at once, they started banging. These noises, which were one unholy racket, scared the wits out of me. There was a way of avoiding them, you had to turn on the cold water first, and then somehow twiddle the hot tap until the temperature was right. That was what mum, dad and Yngve did. I had tried, but the shrill scream which penetrated the walls and was followed by a crescendo of banging, as though something down

below was working itself up into a fury, started the second I touched the hot water tap, and I turned it off as fast as I could, and ran out, my body shaking violently with fear. So, in the morning, I either washed in cold water or took Yngve's dirty but lukewarm water.

Dogs, foxes and plumbing were concrete, physical threats, I knew where I was with them, either they were there or they weren't. But the headless man and the grinning skeleton, they belonged to the kingdom of death, and they couldn't be handled in the same way, they could be anywhere and everywhere, in a cupboard if you opened it in the dark, on the stairs as you were going up or down, in the forest, indeed even under the bed or in the bathroom. I associated my own reflection in windows with the creatures from beyond, perhaps because they only appeared when it was dark outside, but it was a terrible thought, seeing your own reflection in the black window pane and thinking that image is not me, but a ghoul staring in at me.

The year we started school none of us believed in sprites, pixies or trolls any more, we laughed at those who did, but the notion of ghosts and apparitions persisted, perhaps because we didn't dare ignore it; dead people did exist, and we knew that, all of us. Other notions we had, coming from the same tangled realm, that of mythology, were of a happier, more innocent nature, such as that of the pot of gold at the end of a rainbow. Even that autumn when we started the first class we still believed the myth enough for us to go in search of the rainbow. It must have been one Saturday in September, the rain had been tipping down all morning, we were playing on the road below the house where Geir Håkon lived, or to be more precise, in the ditch that was flooded with water. At this precise spot the road passed a blasted rock face, and water was dripping and trickling down from its

moss, grass and soil-covered top. We were wearing wellies, thick brightly coloured oilskin trousers and jackets, with the hoods tied around our chins, thus displacing all sound; your own breathing and the movements of your head, where your ears met the inside of the hood, were always loud and clear while everything else was muffled and seemed to be happening a long distance away. Between the trees on the other side of the road and at the top of the mountain above us the mist was thick. The orange rooftops on both sides of the road downhill wore a dull sheen in the grey light. Above the forest at the bottom of the slope the sky hung like a swollen belly, penetrated by the pouring rain which continued to dance on our hoods and now over-sensitive ears.

We made a dam, but the sand we shovelled up kept collapsing, and when we caught sight of Jacobsen's car coming up the hill, we didn't hesitate, we dropped our spades and ran down to their house, where the car was parking at that moment. A bluish ribbon of smoke floated in the air behind the exhaust pipe. The father got out on one side, as thin as a stick, with a fag end in the corner of his mouth, he bent down, pulled the lever underneath the seat and pushed it forward, so that his two sons, Big Geir and Trond, could get out, while the mother, small and chubby, red-haired and pale, let out their daughter, Wenche, on her side.

'Hi,' we said.

'Hi,' said Geir and Trond.

'Where have you been?'

'To town.'

'Hello, boys,' their father said.

'Hi,' we said.

'Do you want to hear what seven hundred and seventy-seven is in German?' he said.

'Yes.'

'*Siebenhundertsiebenundsiebzig*!' he said in his hoarse voice. 'Ha ha ha!'

We laughed with him. His laughter morphed into coughing.

'Right then,' he said when the fit was over. He inserted the key in the car door lock and twisted. His lips kept twitching, and one eye too.

'Where are you off to?' Trond asked.

'Dunno,' I said.

'Can I join you?'

'Of course you can.'

Trond was the same age as Geir and me, but much smaller. His eyes were as round as saucers, his lower lip was thick and red, his nose small. Above this doll-like face grew blond curly hair. His brother looked completely different: his eyes were narrow and crafty, his smile was often mocking, his hair straight and sandy brown, the bridge of his nose freckly. But he was small too.

'Put your waterproof on,' his mother said.

'I'll just get my waterproof,' Trond said, and ran indoors. We stood waiting without saying a word, our arms down by our sides like two penguins. It had stopped raining. A light wind shook the tops of the tall slim pine trees scattered round the gardens below. A thin stream ran down the hill, alongside the road, taking with it little heaps of pine needles, the tiny yellow Vs or fishbones strewn everywhere.

In the sky behind us the cloud cover had opened. The scenery around us, with all the rooftops, lawns, clumps of trees, ridges and slopes, was now suffused with a kind of glow. From the hill above our house, which we called the mountain, a rainbow had risen.

'Look,' I said. 'A rainbow!'

'Wow!' Geir said.

Up at the house Trond had closed the door. He started running towards us.

'There's a rainbow over the mountain!' Geir said.

'Shall we go and look for the pot of gold?'

'Yes, let's!' Trond said.

We ran down the slope. On Karlsen's lawn Anne Lene, Kent Arne's little sister, stood watching us. She was wearing a safety harness; it was attached to a rein so that she wouldn't run off. Her mother's red car was parked in the drive. A light shone from a wall lamp. Outside Gustavsen's house Trond slowed down.

'I'm sure Leif Tore would like to join us,' he said.

'I don't think he's at home,' I said.

'We can ask anyway,' Trond said, walking between the two brick gateposts, which were not hung with any gates and therefore subject to my father's ridicule, and into the drive. A hollow metal globe from which protruded an arrow, all carried by a naked man with a bent back, was cemented to the tops of the posts. It was a sundial, and my father made fun of that too, for what was the point of *two* sundials?

'Leif Tore,' Trond shouted. 'Are you coming out?'

He looked at us. Then we all shouted.

'Leif Tore! Are you coming out?'

A few seconds passed. Then the kitchen window was opened, and his mother stuck out her head.

'He's coming now. He's just putting on his rain gear. You don't need to shout any more.'

I had a precise picture of this pot. Large and black, with three legs, full of glittering objects. Gold, silver, diamonds, rubies, sapphires. There was one at each end of the rainbow. We had looked for it before, without any luck. It was important to be quick, rainbows never lasted long.

Leif Tore, who for a while now had been a shadow behind the yellow glass of the door, opened it at last. A wave of warm air streamed out from behind him. It was always so hot in their house. I caught a slight odour of something that was both acrid and sweet. That was how it smelled in their house. All the houses apart from ours had their own smell, this was theirs.

'What are we going to do?' he said, slamming the door behind him and making the glass rattle.

'There's a rainbow on the mountain. We're going to search for the pot of gold,' Trond said.

'Come on then!' Leif Tore said, breaking into a run. We followed, down the last part of the hill and onto the road going up towards the mountain. Yngve's bike still wasn't back in its place, I could see, but both mum's green Beetle and dad's red Kadett were there. Mum had been doing the hoovering when I left, it was awful, I hated it, it was like a wall pressing itself against me. And they opened the windows while they were cleaning, the air indoors was freezing cold, and it was as if the cold was transmitted to mum as well, she had no space left in her for anything else when she leaned over the wash tub wringing the cloth, or when she pushed the broom or the Hoover across the floor, and since it was only in this surplus space that there was room for me, I also got cold on these Saturday mornings, in fact so cold that the chill penetrated my head and even made it difficult to lie on the bed reading comics, which normally I loved, so that in the end I had no choice but to get dressed and run outside and hope there was something happening there.

Both mum and dad did the cleaning in our house, which was not the norm; to my knowledge none of the other fathers did it, with the possible exception of Prestbakmo, but I had never seen him do it and actually doubted whether he would submit to that kind of work.

But on this day dad had been to town to buy crabs at the harbour, after which he had sat in his office smoking cigarettes and perhaps marking essays, perhaps reading documents, perhaps fiddling around with his stamp collection, or perhaps reading *The Phantom*.

On the other side of our creosoted garden fence, where the path to B-Max started, water from a manhole cover had flooded the forest floor. Rolf, Leif Tore's brother, had said a few days ago that it was dad's responsibility. 'Responsibility', that was not a word he would normally use, so I guessed he had got it from his father. Dad was on the local council, they were the people who made the decisions on the island, and that was what Gustavsen, Leif Tore and Rolf's father, had meant. Dad had to report the flooding so they could send someone to do the repairs. As we walked up and my attention was again caught by the unnaturally large amount of water between the small thin trees, with the odd bit of white toilet paper floating in it what was more, I decided to tell him if the opportunity arose. Tell him he would have to report it at the Monday meeting.

There he was! In his blue waterproof jacket, with no hood, his blue denim trousers, which he wore whenever he was going to work in the garden, and his green knee-high boots, he rounded the corner of the house. His upper body was twisted slightly to one side as he was carrying a ladder with both hands across the lawn, and then he dug it into the ground, straightened up and pushed it into position against the house roof.

I turned back and sped up to catch the others.

'The rainbow's still there!' I shouted.

'We can see it too!' Leif Tore cried.

I caught them up at the start of the path, walked behind Trond's yellow jacket between the trees, which shed a shower of rain every time anyone lifted a branch, down to the dark

house where Molden lived. He didn't have any young children, only a teenager with long hair, big glasses, brown clothes and flared trousers. We didn't even know what his name was and we just called him Molden as well.

The best way up to the top of what we called a mountain went past their garden, and that was the path we were taking now, slowly, because it was steep and the long yellow grass here was slippery. Now and then I grabbed a sapling to pull myself up. Just below the summit, the mountain was bare and protruded outwards, impossible to walk up, at least when it was as wet as it was now, but at the edge there was a crevice between the rock face and a gently projecting crag where you could get a foothold and easily clamber up the last few metres to the summit.

'Where's it gone?' Trond said, the first man up.

'It was right there!' Geir said, pointing a few metres along the little plateau.

'Oh no,' Leif Tore said. 'It's down there. Look!'

Everyone turned to look. The rainbow was over the forest, a long way down. One end was above the trees below Beck's house, the other near the grassy incline descending to the bay.

'Shall we go down then?' Trond said.

'What if the treasure's still here?' Leif Tore said, in the dialect we spoke. 'We could at least have a peek.'

'It isn't,' I said. 'It's only where the rainbow is.'

'Who took it then? That's what I'd like to know,' Leif Tore said.

'No one did,' I said. 'Are you daft or what? No one brings it either, if that's what you think. It's the rainbow.'

'You're the one who's daft,' Leif Tore said. 'It can't just disappear all on its own.'

'It seems it can,' I said.

'No, it can't,' Leif Tore said.

'Yes, it can,' I said. 'Have a look then. See if you can find it!'

'I want to look too,' Trond said.

'Me too,' Geir said.

'Count me out,' I said.

They turned and walked away, glancing from side to side. I wanted to go with them, I could feel myself drawn, but it wasn't possible now. Instead I looked at the view. It was the best vantage point anywhere. You could see the bridge almost rising from the treetops, you could see the sound, where there were always boats crossing, and you could see the big white gasometers on the other side. You could see the island of Gjerstadholmen, you could see the new road, the low concrete bridge it crossed, you could see Ubekilen Bay from the landward side. And you could see the estate. All the red and orange roofs among the trees. The road. Our garden, Gustavsen's garden; the rest was hidden.

The sky above the estate was almost completely blue now. The clouds towards the town, white. While on the other side, behind Ubekilen, they were still heavy and grey.

I could see dad down there. A tiny, tiny little figure, no bigger than an ant, on top of the ladder against the roof.

Could he see me up here? I wondered.

A gust of wind blew off the sea.

I turned to watch the others. Two yellow dots and one light green one moving to and fro between the trees. The rocky plateau was dark grey, much like the sky beyond, with yellow and, in some places, whitish grass in the cracks. A branch lay there, all its weight resting on the many needle-thin side branches in such a way that the thick main stem didn't touch the ground. It looked strange.

I had hardly ever been in the forest that lay ahead. The furthest I had gone on the path was to a large uprooted tree, perhaps thirty metres inside. From there you could see down a slope where nothing grew but heather. With the tall slim pine trees

on both sides and the denser-growing spruces like a wall beneath, it resembled a large room.

Geir said he saw a fox there once. I didn't believe him, but foxes were no laughing matter, so for safety's sake we had taken with us a packed lunch and bottles of juice to the edge of the mountain, where the whole of the world as we knew it lay beneath us.

'Here it is!' Leif Tore shouted. 'Wow! The pot of gold!'

'Wow!' Geir shouted.

'You can't fool me!' I shouted back.

'Yippeeeee!' Leif Tore cried. 'We're rich!'

'I don't believe it!' Trond shouted.

Then it all went quiet.

Had they really found it?

Not at all. They were trying to trick me.

But the end of the rainbow had been on this precise spot.

What if Leif Tore was right and the treasure hadn't disappeared with the rainbow?

I took a few steps forward and tried to see through the juniper bushes they were standing behind.

'Ohhh, cripes! Look at this!' Leif Tore said.

I made up my mind in a flash and hurried over, dashing between the trees and past the bushes, then stopped.

They looked at me.

'Gotcha! Ha ha ha! We gotcha!'

'I knew all the time,' I said. 'I was just coming to get you. The rainbow will be gone if we don't hurry.'

'Oh yes,' said Leif Tore. 'We tricked you good and proper. Admit it.'

'Come on, Geir,' I said. 'Let's go and look for the pot of gold down there.'

Feeling uncomfortable, Geir looked at Leif Tore and Trond.

But he was my best friend and joined me. Trond and Leif Tore ambled along after us.

'I need a piss,' Leif Tore said. 'Shall we see who can piss the furthest? Over the edge? It'll be one great big long jet!'

Piss outdoors when dad was down there and might be able to see?

Leif Tore was already out of his waterproof trousers and fumbling with his fly zip. Geir and Trond had taken up positions either side of him and were wriggling their hips and pulling down their trousers.

'I can't piss,' I said. 'I've just had one.'

'You haven't,' Geir said, turning towards me with both his hands around his willy. 'We've been together all day.'

'I had a piss while you were looking for the treasure,' I said.

The next second they were enveloped in a cloud of steam as they pissed. I stepped forward to see who won. Surprisingly, it was Trond.

'Rolf pulled his foreskin back,' Leif Tore said, closing his flies. 'So he pissed much further from the off.'

'The rainbow's gone,' Geir said, shaking his dick for a last time before tucking it back.

Everyone looked down over the edge.

'What shall we do now?' Trond said.

'No idea,' said Leif Tore.

'Let's go to the boathouse, shall we?' I suggested.

'What can we do there?' said Leif Tore.

'Well, we can climb onto the roof,' I said.

'Good idea!' Leif Tore said.

We zigzagged down the slope, fought our way through the dense spruce forest and arrived five minutes later on the gravel road that ran around the bay. The grassy hill on the other side was where we usually went skiing in the winter. In the summer

and autumn we seldom went there, what was there to do? The bay was shallow and muddy, no good for swimming, the jetty was falling to pieces, and the little island off the coast was covered with shit from the colony of gulls nesting there. When we wandered around there it was mostly because we were at a loose end, like this morning. High above us, between the sloping field and the edge of the forest there was an old white house in which an old white-haired lady lived. We knew nothing about her. Not her name, nor what she did there. Sometimes we peered into the house, laid our hands against the window and pressed our faces against the glass. Not for any particular reason, nor out of curiosity, more because we could. We saw a sitting room with old furniture or a kitchen with old utensils. Near the house, past the narrow gravel road, there was a red barn seemingly on the verge of collapse. And at the very bottom, by the stream running down from the forest, there was an old unpainted boathouse with tarred felt on the roof. Along the bed of the stream grew ferns and some plants with, relative to their thin stems, enormous leaves; if you swept them aside with your hands, in that swimming stroke way people do, to see past the unresisting foliage, the ground appeared naked, as though the plants were deceiving us, pretending they were lush and green while in reality, beneath the dense leaves, there was almost nothing but soil. Further down, closer to the water, the earth or clay or whatever it was, was a reddish colour reminiscent of rust. Occasionally a variety of things got caught there, a bit of a plastic bag or a johnnie, but not on days like today, when the water gushed out from the pipe under the road in an enormous torrent and only abated when it reached the little delta-like area where the water fanned out before it met the bay.

The boathouse was grey with age. In some places you could insert a hand between the planks, so we knew what the inside

looked like, without any of us having been in there. After peering through these gaps for a while we directed our attention to the roof, which we were going to try to climb. In order to do so we would have to find something to stand on. Nothing in the immediate vicinity was of any use, so we sneaked up to the barn and did a recce there. First of all, we made sure there were no cars up behind the house, there was one there sometimes, the owner was a man, perhaps her son, he would occasionally stop us crossing the drive when we wanted to extend our ski run, which she never did. So we kept an eye open for him.

No car.

Some white cans strewn by the wall. I recognised them from my grandparents' farm; it was formic acid. A rusty oil drum. A door hanging off its hinges.

Over there though! A pallet!

We lifted it. It had almost grown into the ground. Full of woodlice and small spider-like insects crawling all over the place as we lifted. Then we carried it between us all the way across the field and down to the boathouse. Leaned it against the wall. Leif Tore, acknowledged to be the bravest among us, was the first to have a go. Standing on the pallet, he managed to get one elbow on the roof. With his other hand he took a firm grip on the edge of the roof, and then he *launched* one leg into the air. He got it over the edge, for an instant it rested on the roof, but as soon as his body followed, he lost his grip and plummeted like a sack of potatoes, unable to break his fall with his hands. He hit the slanted pallet with his ribs and slid down to the ground.

'Agh!' he screamed. 'Oh shit. Ooohh. Ow! Ow! Ow!'

He slowly got to his feet, studied his hands and rubbed one buttock.

'Oooh, that hurt! Someone else can try now!'

He looked at me.

'My arms aren't strong enough,' I said.

'I'll give it a bash,' Geir said.

If Leif Tore was known for being brave, Geir was known for being wild. Not by nature, because had it been up to him he would have stayed at home drawing and pottering about to his heart's content all day long, but when he was challenged. Perhaps he was a bit gullible. That summer he and I had built a cart, with a great deal of help from his father, and when it was finished I got him to push me around, just by saying it would make him strong. Gullible but also foolhardy, sometimes all boundaries ceased to exist for him, then he was capable of anything.

Geir chose a different method to Leif Tore. Standing on the pallet, he grabbed the protruding roof with both hands and tried to *walk* up the wall, with all of his weight invested in the fingers he was holding on with. That was, of course, stupid. Even if he had managed it, he would have been standing horizontal to the ground *under* the roof, in a much worse position than when he started.

His fingers slipped and he plunged arse first onto the pallet, after which he hit the back of his head.

He gave an involuntary grunt. When he stood up I could see that he had really hurt himself. He took a few determined paces to and fro, grunting. *Nghn!* Then he mounted the pallet again. This time he adopted Leif Tore's method. Once he had his leg over the edge, a series of electric charges seemed to shoot through him, his leg banged against the roofing felt, his body writhed, and hey presto, there he was, kneeling on the roof and looking down on us.

'Easy!' he said. 'Come on! I can pull you up!'

'You cannot. You aren't strong enough!' Trond said.

'We can give it a try at any rate,' Geir said.

'You'd better come down,' Leif Tore said. 'I have to go home soon anyway.'

'Me too,' I said.

He didn't seem disappointed though, up there. Determined would be a more accurate term.

'I'll jump down then,' he said.

'Isn't it a bit high?' Leif Tore said.

'Not at all,' Geir said. 'Just have to put my mind to it.'

He squatted down and stared at the ground while taking deep breaths as though intending to dive into water. For a second all the tension in his body was gone, he must have changed his mind, but then he braced himself and he jumped. Fell, rolled around, bounced up again like a spring and started brushing his thigh to signal composure, almost before he was upright.

Had I been the only one of us to climb the roof, it would have been a great triumph. Leif Tore would never have given in. Even if he had spent all night climbing up and falling off he would have gone on trying to reduce the imbalance that had suddenly become apparent. Geir was different though. In fact, he could pull off the most amazing feats, like jumping five metres through the air into a snowdrift, something no one else would dare, and it meant nothing to him. It was of no real consequence. Geir was just Geir, whatever he got into his head to do.

Without another word, we walked up the hill. In some places the water had carried parts of the road surface along with it, in others there were long sunken dips. We stopped for a while and pressed our heels into an especially soft patch, the wet gravel oozed over the edge of our boots, it was a good feeling. My hands were cold. When I squeezed them my fingers left white marks in the red flesh. But the warts, three on one thumb, two on the other, one on an index finger, three on the back of my hand, didn't change colour, they were a dull reddish-brown colour as

always and covered with a layer of small dots you could scratch off. Then we went into the other part of the field, the bit that came to an end by a stone wall and the forest behind it; it was as though it was bordered by a long ridge, quite steep, perhaps ten metres high, clad with a line of spruce trees, broken occasionally by a knoll of bare rock. Walking here or in similar areas, I often happily indulged the notion that the countryside resembled the sea. And that fields were the surface of the sea with mountains and islands rising from them.

Oh, to sail in a boat through the forest! To swim among the trees! Now *that* would be something.

We sometimes used to drive to the far side of the island when the weather was good, park the car on the old shooting range and walk down to the sea-smoothed rocks, our regular spot, not so far from Spornes beach, where of course I would have preferred to be, as there was sand and I could wade out to a depth that suited me. By the rocks the water was immediately very deep. There was, however, a little inlet, a kind of narrow cleft that filled up with water, which you could climb down into, where you could swim, but it was small and the sea bottom was uneven, covered with barnacles, seaweed and shells. The waves beat against the rocks outside, causing the water to rise inside, sometimes up to your neck, and the styrofoam floats on the life jacket I wore were lifted up to my ears. The sheer walls amplified the gurgling and slopping of the water, making them somehow sound hollow. Terrified, I would stand there, suddenly incapable of drawing breath in any other way than with great, shuddering gasps. It was just as creepy when the waves receded and the water level inside sank with a slurp. When the sea was calm, dad would sometimes inflate the yellow and green lilo, which I was allowed to lie on and float close to the shore, where with my bare front stuck to the wet plastic and my back hot and dry

from the burning sun I would splash around, paddling with my hands in the water, which was so fresh and salty, watching the seaweed languidly sway to and fro along the rocks it was attached to, looking for fish or crabs or following a boat on the horizon. In the afternoon the Danish ferry came in, we could see it in the distance when we arrived, and it would be in the Galtesund strait when we left, white, enormous, towering above the low islands and reefs. Was it MS *Venus*? Or was it *Christian IV*? Kids all along the southern and western sides of the island, and presumably also the kids living on the other side of Galte Sound, on the, for us, foreign island of Hisøya, would go swimming when it came because its wake was immense and notorious. One afternoon, as I was paddling around on the lilo, the sudden waves made me sit up and I toppled into the water. I sank like a stone. The water would have been about three metres deep there. I thrashed around with my arms and legs, shouted in panic, swallowed water, which only increased my fear, but it didn't last more than twenty seconds because dad had seen everything. He dived in and dragged me to the shore. I regurgitated some water, I was very cold, and we went home. I hadn't been in any real danger and the incident had no lasting effect, except to leave me with the feeling I had as I walked up the hill to tell Geir what had happened: the world was something I walked on top of, it was impenetrable and hard, it was impossible to sink through it, no matter if it rose in steep mountains, or fell in deep valleys. Of course I had known it was like that, but I had never felt it before, the sense that we were walking on a surface.

Despite this incident and the unease I could occasionally feel when I was paddling in the narrow inlet I always looked forward to these trips. Sitting on a towel beside Yngve and scanning the light blue mirror-glass sea that only ended on the horizon, where

big ships glided slowly past like hour hands, or looking at the two lighthouses on Torungen, the white a sharp contrast with the bright blue sky: not much was better than that. Drinking pop that had been in the red-checked cooler bag, eating biscuits, perhaps watching dad as he walked to the edge of the rocks, tanned and muscular, and dived into the sea two metres below a second later. The way he shook his head and stroked back the hair from his eyes when he emerged, the rush of bubbles around him, a rare gleam of pleasure in his eyes as he swam to shore with those slow, ponderous lunges of his arms, his body bobbing up and down in the swell. Or walking to the two sinkholes nearby, one a man's depth with distinct spiral marks in the rock on the way down, filled with salty seawater, covered by green sea plants and at the bottom clusters of seaweed, the second less deep but no less beautiful for that. Or up to the shallow, extremely salty, hot pools that filled the hollows in the rock, refreshed only when there were storms, the surface thick with tiny swirling insects and the bottom bedecked with yellow sickly-looking algae.

On one such day dad decided to teach me how to swim. He told me to follow him down to the water's edge. Perhaps half a metre below the surface a small slippery ridge overgrown with seaweed jutted into the sea, and that was where I was to stand. Dad swam out to a reef four or five metres from the shore. And turned to face me.

'Now you swim over here to me,' he said.

'But it's deep!' I said. Because it was, the seabed between the two reefs was barely visible, it was probably three metres down.

'I'm here, Karl Ove. Don't you think I could rescue you if you sank? Come on, swim. It's not in the slightest bit dangerous! I know you can do it. Launch yourself and do the strokes. If you do that you can swim, you know! Then you can swim!'

I crouched down in the water.

The seabed was a greenish glimmer a long way down. Would I be able to float over that?

My heart only beat this hard when I was frightened.

'I can't,' I shouted.

'Course you can!' dad shouted back. 'It's so easy! Just push off, do a couple of strokes and you'll be here.'

'I can't!' I said.

He studied me. Then he sighed and swam over.

'OK,' he said. 'I'll swim beside you. I can hold a hand under your tummy. Then you *can't* sink!'

But I *couldn't* do it. Why didn't he understand?

I started to cry.

'I can't,' I said.

The depth of the water was in my head and in my chest. The depth was in my arms and legs, in my fingers and toes. The depth filled all of me. Was I supposed to be able to *think* that away?

There weren't any more smiles to be seen now. With a stern expression he clambered onto the land, walked over to our things and returned with my life jacket.

'Put this on then,' he said, throwing it to me. 'Now you *can't* sink even if you tried.'

I put it on, even though I knew it didn't change anything.

He swam out again. Turned to face me.

'Try now!' he said. 'Over here to me!'

I crouched down. The water washed over my trunks. I stretched my arms under the water.

'That's the way!' dad said.

All I had to do was push off, do a few strokes and it would be all over.

But I couldn't. I would never ever be able to swim across that deep water. Tears were rolling down my cheeks.

'Come on, boy!' dad shouted. 'We haven't got all day!'

'I CAN'T!' I shouted back. 'CAN'T YOU HEAR?'

He stiffened and glared at me, his eyes furious.

'Are you being stroppy?' he said.

'No,' I answered, unable to suppress a sob. My arms were shaking.

He swam over and took a firm grip of my arm.

'Come here,' he said. He tried to tow me out. I twisted my body towards the shore.

'I don't want to!' I said.

He let go and took a deep breath.

'You don't say,' he said. 'We know that, don't we.'

Then he went to where we had left our clothes, lifted the towel with both hands and rubbed his face. I took off the life jacket and followed him, stopping a few metres away. He raised one arm and dried underneath, then the other. Bent forward and dried his thighs. Threw the towel down, picked up his shirt and buttoned it while surveying the perfectly calm sea. Then he pulled on a pair of socks and stuck his feet in his shoes. They were brown leather shoes without laces, which matched neither the socks nor his bathing trunks.

'What are you waiting for?' he said.

I pulled the light blue Las Palmas T-shirt I had been given by my grandparents over my head and laced up my blue trainers. Dad tossed the two empty pop bottles and the orange peel in the cooler bag, slung it over his shoulder and set off, the wet towel crumpled up in his other hand. He said nothing on the way to the car. Opened the boot, put in the cooler bag, took the life jacket from my hands and placed it next to the bag together with his towel. The fact that I also had a towel didn't seem to enter his head and I certainly didn't intend to bother him with that.

Even though he had parked in the shade, the car was in the sun. The black seats were boiling hot and burned against my thighs. I wondered briefly whether to put my wet towel over the seat. But he would notice. Instead I placed my palms downwards and sat on them, as close to the edge as I could.

Dad started the car and drove off at walking speed; the whole of the open gravel area, known as the firing range, was full of large stones. The road he took afterwards was pitted with potholes too, so he drove equally slowly along there. Green branches and bushes brushed the bonnet and roof, sometimes there was the odd thump, as a branch hit the car. My hands were still stinging, but less so now. It was only then it struck me that dad was also wearing shorts on a red-hot seat. I glanced at his face in the mirror. It was grim and uncommunicative, but there was no indication that his thighs were burning.

When we came out onto the main road below the church he accelerated away and drove the five kilometres home at far above the speed limit.

'He's frightened of water,' he told my mother that afternoon. It wasn't true, but I said nothing. I wasn't stupid.

A week later my grandparents on my mother's side came to visit us. It was the first time they had been to Tybakken. Back on their farm in Sørbøvåg they weren't the slightest bit out of place, they fitted in perfectly, grandad with his blue overalls and black, narrow-brimmed hats, long brown rubber boots and constant spitting of tobacco, grandma with her worn but clean flowery dresses, grey hair and broad body, and hands that always trembled slightly. But when they got out of the car in the drive in front of our house, after dad had picked them up from Kjevik, I could see at once they didn't fit in. Grandad was wearing his grey Sunday suit, light blue shirt and a grey hat, in his hand he held his pipe, not by the stem, the way dad did, but with his

fingers round the bowl. He used the stem to point with, I noticed, when later they were being shown around our garden. Grandma wore a light grey coat, light grey shoes and on her arm she carried a bag. No one dressed like that here. You never saw anyone dressed like that in Arendal either. It was as though they came from another era.

They filled our rooms with their strangeness. Mum and dad suddenly behaved differently too, mostly dad, who behaved just as he did at Christmas. His invariable 'No' became 'Why not?'; his ever watchful eyes became affable and a friendly hand could even be placed on my or Yngve's shoulder as a casual greeting. But even though he chatted to grandma with interest, I could see that in fact he wasn't interested, there were always brief moments when he looked away, and then his eyes tended to be utterly lifeless. Grandad, cheerful and enthusiastic, but somehow smaller and more vulnerable here than he was at home, never appeared to notice this trait of dad's. Or perhaps he just ignored it.

One evening when they were with us dad bought some crabs. For him they were the apotheosis of festive food, and even though it was early in the season there was meat in the ones he had managed to find. But my grandparents, they didn't eat crabs. If grandad got crabs in the net, well, he would throw them back. Dad would later tell stories about this, he viewed it as comical, a kind of superstition, that crabs should be less clean than fish, just because they crawled over the seabed and didn't swim as they pleased through the water above. Crabs might eat dead bodies, since they eat everything that falls to the bottom, but what were the odds of *these* crabs having chanced upon a corpse in the depths of the Skagerrak?

One afternoon we had been sitting in the garden drinking coffee and juice, afterwards I had gone to my room, where I lay

on my bed reading comics, and I heard grandma and grandad coming up the stairs. They didn't say anything, trod heavily on the steps and went into the living room. The sunlight on the wall of my room was golden. The lawn outside had great patches of yellow and even brown, although dad switched on the sprinkler the instant the local council gave permission. Everything I could see along the road, all the houses, all the gardens, all the cars and all the tools leaning against walls and doorsteps were in a state of slumber, it seemed to me. My sweaty chest stuck uncomfortably to the duvet cover. I got up, opened the door and went into the living room, where grandma and grandad were sitting in their separate chairs.

'Would you like to watch TV?' I asked.

'Yes, the news is on soon, isn't it?' grandma said. 'That's what interests us, you know.'

I went over and switched on the TV. A few seconds passed before the picture appeared. Then the screen slowly lit up, the 'N' of *Dagsrevyen* grew larger and larger as the simple xylophone jingle sounded, *ding-dong-ding-dooong*, faint at first, then louder and louder. I took a step back. Grandad leaned forward in his chair, the pipe stem pointing away from his hand.

'There we are,' I said.

Actually, I wasn't allowed to turn on the TV, nor the large radio on the shelf by the wall, I always had to ask mum or dad if they could do it for me when there was something I wanted to see or listen to. But now I was doing it for grandma and grandad, surely he wouldn't object to that.

All of a sudden the picture started flickering wildly. The colours became distorted. Then there was a flash, a loud *puff!* and then the screen went black.

Oh no.

Oh no, oh no, oh no.

'What happened to the TV?' grandad asked.

'It's broken,' I said, my eyes full of tears.

It was me who had broken it.

'It can happen,' grandad said. 'And actually we like the news on the radio better.'

He got up from his chair and shuffled over to the radio with his small steps. I went into my room. Chill with fear, my stomach churning, I lay down on the bed. The duvet cover was cool against my hot bare skin. I took a comic from the pile on the floor. But I was unable to read. Soon he would come in, go over to the TV and switch it on. If it had broken while I had been alone perhaps I could have acted as if nothing had happened, then he would have thought it had stopped working of its own accord. Although probably he would have worked out that it was me even so, because he had a nose for anything untoward, one glance at me was enough for him to know something was wrong and he put two and two together. Now, however, I couldn't feign ignorance, grandma and grandad had been witnesses, they would tell him what had happened, and if I tried to hide anything it would make matters much, much worse.

I sat up on the bed. I had a knot in my stomach, but there was no hint of the warmth and softness that illness brought with it, it was cold and painful and so tight that no tears in the world could undo it.

For a while I sat crying.

If only Yngve had been at home. Then I could have stayed with him in his room for as long as possible. But he was out swimming with Steinar and Kåre.

A sense that I would be nearer to him if I went into his room, even though it was empty, brought me to my feet. I opened the door, tiptoed along the landing and into his room. His bed had been painted blue, mine orange, in the same way as his cupboard

doors were blue and mine were orange. The room smelled of Yngve. I went to the bed and sat down.

The window was ajar!

That was more than I had dared hope for. Now I could hear their voices down on the terrace without their knowing I was here. If the window had been closed I would have revealed my presence when I opened it.

Dad's voice rose and sank in the calm manner it did when he was in a good mood. Now and then I caught mum's brighter, gentler voice. From the living room came the sound of the radio. For some reason I had the impression that my grandparents were asleep, each in their separate chairs, their mouths open and their eyes closed, perhaps they often sat like that in Sørbøvåg when we visited them.

There was a clink of cups outside.

Were they clearing the table?

Yes, because straight afterwards I heard the flip-flop of mum's sandals as she walked around the house.

At once I wanted to have her for myself! Then I would be able to tell her first!

I waited until I heard the door below being opened. Then, as mum came upstairs carrying a tray of cups, dishes, glasses and the shiny coffee pot with the red lid standing on a garland of clothes pegs that Yngve had made at mum's arts and crafts workshop I went out onto the landing.

'Are you inside in this hot weather?' she said.

'Yes,' I answered.

She was about to walk past, but then she stopped.

'Is there something the matter?' she asked.

I looked down.

'Is there?'

'The TV's bust,' I said.

'Oh no,' she said. 'That's a pity. Are grandma and grandad in there?'

I nodded.

'I was just about to go and get them. It's such a fantastic evening. You come out too, come on. You can have some more juice if you want.'

I shook my head and went back into my room. Stopped inside the door. Perhaps it would be wisest to join them outside? He wouldn't do anything if they were there, even if he found out I had broken the TV.

But that in itself could make him even more furious. Last time we had been to Sørbøvåg everyone had been sitting round the dinner table, and Kjartan had been saying that Yngve had had a fight with Bjørn Atle, the boy on the neighbouring farm. Everyone had laughed at that, dad too. But when mum had taken me to the shop and the others were having a midday nap, and Yngve had gone to bed to read a comic, dad had gone in, lifted him up and shaken him about because he had been fighting.

Nope, the best would be to stay here. If grandad or mum said the TV was broken he might lose his temper while he was sitting there with them.

I lay back down on my bed. My chest trembled uncontrollably; another flood of tears was set in motion.

Ohhhh. Ohhhh. Ohhhh.

He would be coming soon.

I knew it.

Soon he would be here.

I put my hands over my ears and closed my eyes and tried to pretend nothing existed. Only this darkness and this breathing.

But a feeling of defencelessness overcame me, and I did the opposite, knelt on the bed and looked out of the window, at the

flood of light falling across the landscape, the glowing roof tiles and glinting window panes.

The door downstairs was opened and slammed.

I cast around wildly. Got up, pulled the chair from under the desk and sat down.

Footsteps on the stairs. They were heavy; it was him.

I couldn't sit with my back to the door and got up again. Perched on the edge of the bed.

He thrust open the door. Took a step inside and stopped, looked at me.

His eyes were narrow, his lips clenched.

'What are you doing, boy?' he said.

'Nothing,' I said, eyes downcast.

'Look at me when you talk to me!' he said.

I looked at him. But I couldn't. I looked down again.

'Something wrong with your ears as well?' he said. 'LOOK AT ME!'

I looked at him. But his eyes, I couldn't meet them.

He took three quick strides across the floor, grabbed my ear and twisted it as he dragged me to my feet.

'What did I tell you about switching on the TV?' he said.

I fought for breath and was unable to answer.

'WHAT DID I SAY?' he said, twisting harder.

'That I . . . that I sh . . . sh . . . shouldn't do it,' I said.

He let go of my ear, grabbed both of my arms and shook me.

'NOW LOOK AT ME!' he yelled.

I raised my head. Tears almost blurred him out.

His fingers squeezed harder.

'Didn't I tell you to keep away from the TV? Eh? Didn't I tell you? Now we'll have to buy a new TV and where will we get the money from? Can you answer me that, eh!'

'No-o-o-o,' I sobbed.