

For the heart, life is simple: it beats for as long as it can. Then it stops. Sooner or later, one day, this pounding action will cease of its own accord, and the blood will begin to run towards the body's lowest point, where it will collect in a small pool, visible from outside as a dark, soft patch on ever whitening skin, as the temperature sinks, the limbs stiffen and the intestines drain. These changes in the first hours occur so slowly and take place with such inexorability that there is something almost ritualistic about them, as though life capitulates according to specific rules, a kind of gentleman's agreement to which the representatives of death also adhere, inasmuch as they always wait until life has retreated before they launch their invasion of the new landscape. By which point, however, the invasion is irrevocable. The enormous hordes of bacteria that begin to infiltrate the body's innards cannot be halted. Had they but tried a few hours earlier, they would have met

with immediate resistance; however everything around them is quiet now, as they delve deeper and deeper into the moist darkness. They advance on the Havers Channels, the Crypts of Lieberkühn, the Isles of Langerhans. They proceed to Bowman's Capsule in the Renes, Clark's Column in the Spinalis, the black substance in the Mesencephalon. And they arrive at the heart. As yet, it is intact, but deprived of the activity to which end its whole construction has been designed, there is something strangely desolate about it, like a production plant that workers have been forced to flee in haste, or so it appears, the stationary vehicles shining yellow against the darkness of the forest, the huts deserted, a line of fully loaded cable- buckets stretching up the hillside.

The moment life departs the body, it belongs to death. At one with lamps, suitcases, carpets, door handles, windows. Fields, marshes, streams, mountains, clouds, the sky. None of these is alien to us. We are constantly surrounded by objects and phenomena from the realm of death. Nonetheless, there are few things that arouse in us greater distaste than to see a human being caught up in it, at least if we are to judge by the efforts we make to keep corpses out of sight. In larger hospitals they are not only hidden away in discrete, inaccessible rooms, even the pathways there are concealed, with their own elevators and basement corridors, and should you stumble upon one of them, the dead bodies being wheeled by are always covered. When they have to be transported from the hospital it is through a dedicated exit, into vehicles with tinted glass; in the church grounds there is a separate, windowless room for them; during the funeral ceremony they lie in closed coffins until they are lowered into the earth or cremated in the oven. It is hard to imagine what practical purpose this procedure might serve. The uncovered bodies could be wheeled along the hospital corridors, for example, and thence be transported in an ordinary taxi without this posing a particular risk to anyone. The elderly man who dies during a cinema performance might just as well remain in his seat until the film is over, and during the next two for that matter. The teacher who has a heart attack in the school playground does not necessarily have to be driven away immediately; no damage is done by leaving

him where he is until the caretaker has time to attend to him, even though that might not be until sometime in the late afternoon or evening. What difference would it make if a bird were to alight on him and take a peck? Would what awaits him in the grave be any better just because it is hidden? As long as the dead are not in the way there is no need for any rush, they cannot die a second time. Cold snaps in the winter should be particularly propitious in such circumstances. The homeless who freeze to death on benches and in doorways, the suicidal who jump off high buildings and bridges, elderly women who fall down staircases, traffic victims trapped in wrecked cars, the young man who, in a drunken stupor, falls into the lake after a night on the town, the small girl who ends up under the wheel of a bus, why all this haste to remove them from the public eye? Decency? What could be more decent than to allow the girl's mother and father to see her an hour or two later, lying in the snow at the site of the accident, in full view, her crushed head and the rest of her body, her blood-spattered hair and the spotless padded jacket? Visible to the whole world, no secrets, the way she was. But even this one hour in the snow is unthinkable. A town that does not keep its dead out of sight, that leaves people where they died, on highways and byways, in parks and parking lots, is not a town but a hell. The fact that this hell reflects our life experience in a more realistic and essentially truer way is of no consequence. We know this is how it is, but we do not want to face it. Hence the collective act of repression symbolized by the concealment of our dead.

What exactly it is that is being repressed, however, is not so easy to say. It cannot be death itself, for its presence in society is much too prominent. The number of deaths reported in newspapers or shown on the TV news every day varies slightly according to circumstances, but the annual average will presumably tend to be constant, and since it is spread over so many channels virtually impossible to avoid. Yet *that* kind of death does not seem threatening. Quite the contrary, it is something we are drawn to and will happily pay to see. Add the enormously high body count in fiction and it becomes even harder to understand the system that keeps death out of sight. If the phenomenon of death does not frighten us, why then this distaste for dead

bodies? It must mean either that there are two kinds of death or that there is a disparity between our conception of death and death as it actually turns out to be, which in effect boils down to the same thing. What is significant here is that our conception of death is so strongly rooted in our consciousness that we are not only shaken when we see that reality deviates from it, but we also try to conceal this with all the means at our disposal. Not as a result of some form of conscious deliberation, as has been the case with funeral rites, the form and meaning of which are negotiable nowadays, and thus have shifted from the sphere of the irrational to the rational, from the collective to the individual – no, the way we remove bodies has never been the subject of debate, it has always been just something we have done, out of a necessity for which no one can state a reason but everyone feels: if your father dies on the lawn one windswept Sunday in autumn, you carry him indoors if you can, and if you can't, you at least cover him with a blanket. This impulse, however, is not the only one we have with regard to the dead. No less conspicuous than our hiding the corpses is the fact that we always lower them to ground level as fast as possible. A hospital that transports its bodies upward, that sites its cold chambers on the upper floors is practically inconceivable. The dead are stored as close to the ground as possible. And the same principle applies to the agencies that attend them; an insurance company may well have its offices on the eighth floor, but not a funeral parlor. All funeral parlors have their offices as close to street level as possible. Why this should be so is hard to say; one might be tempted to believe that it was based on some ancient convention that originally had a practical purpose, such as a cellar being cold and therefore best suited to storing corpses, and that this principle had been retained in our era of refrigerators and cold-storage rooms, had it not been for the notion that transporting bodies upward in buildings seems *contrary to the laws of nature*, as though height and death are mutually incompatible. As though we possessed some kind of chthonic instinct, something deep within us that urges us to move death down to the earth whence we came.

It might thus appear that death is relayed through two distinct systems. One is associated with concealment and gravity, earth and darkness, the other with openness and airiness, ether and light. A father and his child are killed as the father attempts to pull the child out of the line of fire in a town somewhere in the Middle East, and the image of them huddled together as the bullets thud into flesh, causing their bodies to shudder, as it were, is caught on camera, transmitted to one of the thousands of satellites orbiting the Earth and broadcast on TV sets around the world, from where it slips into our consciousness as yet another picture of death or dying. These images have no weight, no depth, no time, and no place, nor do they have any connection to the bodies that spawned them. They are nowhere and everywhere. Most of them just pass through us and are gone; for diverse reasons some linger and live on in the dark recesses of the brain. An off-piste skier falls and severs an artery in her thigh, blood streams out leaving a red trail down the white slope; she is dead even before her body comes to a halt. A plane takes off, flames shoot out from the engines as it climbs, the sky above the suburban houses is blue, the plane explodes in a ball of fire beneath. A fishing smack sinks off the coast of northern Norway one night, the crew of seven drown, next morning the event is described in all the newspapers, it is a so-called mystery, the weather was calm and no mayday call was sent from the boat, it just disappeared, a fact which the TV stations underline that evening by flying over the scene of the drama in a helicopter and showing pictures of the empty sea. The sky is overcast, the gray-green swell heavy but calm, as though possessing a different temperament from the choppy, white-flecked waves that burst forth here and there. I am sitting alone watching, it is some time in spring, I suppose, for my father is working in the garden. I stare at the surface of the sea without listening to what the reporter says, *and suddenly the outline of a face emerges*. I don't know how long it stays there, a few seconds perhaps, but long enough for it to have a huge impact on me. The moment the face disappears I get up to find someone I can tell. My mother is on the evening shift, my brother is playing soccer, and the other children on our

block won't listen, so it has to be Dad, I think, and hurry down the stairs, jump into shoes, thread my arms through the sleeves of my jacket, open the door, and run around the house. We are not allowed to run in the garden, so just before I enter his line of vision, I slow down and start walking. He is standing at the rear of the house, down in what will be the vegetable plot, lunging at a boulder with a sledgehammer. Even though the hollow is only a few meters deep, the black soil he has dug up and is standing on together with the dense clump of rowan trees growing beyond the fence behind him cause the twilight to deepen. As he straightens up and turns to me, his face is almost completely shrouded in darkness.

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

He puts down the sledgehammer and removes his gloves.

"Well?" he says.

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

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

I shake my head.

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

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

I nod and turn to go.

"Wait a minute," he says.

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

"Right," he says.

After taking a deep drag, he places one foot on the rock and stares in the

direction of the forest on the other side of the road. Or perhaps he is staring at the sky above the trees.

“Was it Jesus you saw?” he asks, looking up at me. Had it not been for the friendly voice and the long pause before the question I would have thought he was poking fun at me. He finds it rather embarrassing that I am a Christian; all he wants of me is that I do not stand out from the other kids, and of all the teeming mass of kids on the estate no one other than his youngest son calls himself a Christian.

But he is really giving this some thought.

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

I shake my head.

“It wasn’t Jesus,” I say.

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

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

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

I was eight years old that evening, my father thirty-two. Even though I still can’t say that I understand him or know what kind of person he was, the fact that I am now seven years older than he was then makes it easier for me to grasp some things. For example, how great the difference was between our days. While my days were jam-packed with meaning, when each step opened a new opportunity, and when every opportunity filled me to the brim, in a way which now is actually incomprehensible, the meaning of his days was not concentrated in individual events but spread over such large areas that it was not possible to comprehend them in anything other than abstract

terms. “Family” was one such term, “career” another. Few or no unforeseen opportunities at all can have presented themselves in the course of his days, he must always have known in broad outline what they would bring and how he would react. He had been married for twelve years, he had worked as a middle-school teacher for eight of them, he had two children, a house and a car. He had been elected onto the local council and appointed to the executive committee representing the Liberal Party. During the winter months he occupied himself with philately, not without some progress: inside a short space of time he had become one of the country’s leading stamp collectors, while in the summer months gardening took up what leisure he had. What he was thinking on this spring evening I have no idea, nor even what perception he had of himself as he straightened up in the gloom with the sledgehammer in his hands, but I am fairly sure that there was some feeling inside him that he understood the surrounding world quite well. He knew who all the neighbors on the estate were and what social status they held in relation to himself, and I imagine he knew quite a bit about what they preferred to keep to themselves, as he taught their children and also because he had a good eye for others’ weaknesses. Being a member of the new educated middle class he was also well-informed about the wider world, which came to him every day via the newspaper, radio, and television. He knew quite a lot about botany and zoology because he had been interested while he was growing up, and though not exactly conversant with other science subjects he did at least have some command of their basic principles from secondary school. He was better at history, which he had studied at university along with Norwegian and English. In other words, he was not an expert at anything, apart from maybe pedagogy, but he knew a bit about everything. In this respect he was a typical school teacher, though, from a time when secondary school teaching still carried some status. The neighbor who lived on the other side of the wall, Prestbakmo, worked as a teacher at the same school, as did the neighbor who lived on top of the tree-covered slope behind our house, Olsen, while one of the neighbors who lived at the far end of the ring road, Knudsen, was the head teacher of another middle school. So when my father raised the sledges-

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

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

only a couple of minutes had passed since I last considered it, everything had changed. Now it was Dad's face I saw.

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

"Are you still there, boy?"

I nodded.

"Get yourself inside."

I started to walk.

"And Karl Ove, remember," he said.

I paused, turned my head, puzzled.

"No running this time."

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

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

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

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

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

I turned and followed the red taillights until they disappeared over the summit of the hill. Then I went in. For a while I tried to lie on my bed reading, but could not settle, and instead went into Yngve's room, from where I could see Dad. When I could see him I felt safer with him, and in a way that was what mattered most. I knew his moods and had learned how to predict them long ago, by means of a kind of subconscious categorization system, I

have later come to realize, whereby the relationship between a few constants was enough to determine what was in store for me, allowing me to make my own preparations. A kind of metereology of the mind . . . The speed of the car up the gentle gradient to the house, the time it took him to switch off the engine, grab his things, and step out, the way he looked around as he locked the car, the subtle nuances of the various sounds that rose from the hall as he removed his coat – everything was a sign, everything could be interpreted. To this was added information about where he had been, and with whom, how long he had been away, before the conclusion, which was the only part of the process of which I was conscious, was drawn. So, what frightened me most was when he turned up *without warning* . . . when for some reason I had been *inattentive* . . .

How on earth did he know I had been running?

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

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

How could he possibly have known?

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

Glancing outside at Dad again, I saw him crossing the lawn with the sledgehammer in one hand and a spade in the other. I took a couple of hasty