Beyond the great indoors

Ingvar Ambjornsen

Chapter 1

'I loved redcurrants when I was a kid,' Kjell Bjarne said. 'Can't stand them now.'

The way he said it led me to believe that something had happened in the meantime. That was not really very surprising, since he had lived half of his life already. And somewhere along the way he had lost his taste for the tart red berries.

Personally, I have nothing against redcurrants. I like redcurrants. What I had lost over the years was the ability to enjoy myself. Life was not as much fun as when I was a boy. But I didn't say anything. That would only have confused him. Besides, it's strange - when you say something out loud it somehow becomes twice as true. And in this case, half as palatable.

Anyway, I didn't have much to complain about. I really did not. Quite the contrary - the truth was that I was a spoilt young man. As are so many other young men in this country. You didn't have to go to Africa to find people who were worse off than us. You just had to cast a glance at the black people in Oslo to know immediately how things stood. As far as I was aware, they were treated like criminals. Even by the police, or rather, particularly by the police. 'Come here, Sambo,' the police said. 'Let's have a wee look at your false papers.' Well, that's certainly what you read in the newspapers.

Kjell Bjarne was standing by the window, staring down at the street below. I wondered what it was he had seen that had suddenly reminded him that he didn't like redcurrants any more. But I knew better than to ask. It was quite possible that he had seen nothing whatsoever that could logically be associated with redcurrants. Not even a red Volkswagen Beetle. He was just saying whatever came into his mind. That's just the way he was. The first time I met him he asked if I knew anything about cows. Which of course I didn't. And when I asked him later why he had asked precisely that question, he replied that he had no idea, he didn't have a clue. It had taken a long time to get close to him. And even longer before I dared to let him get close to me.

But now we were blood brothers. Involuntarily, mind you, but our blood had mingled.

'Sit down,' I said. 'Don't just stand around like a spare part!'

I knew only too well how easy it was to find yourself sidetracked once you started to study reality through the window of a small flat. Before you knew it you'd lost touch with the real world. Now that we shared a common purpose, we had to use every means possible to get back on track. Take part in everyday life, as it were. There were

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pitfalls everywhere; it was like trying to pick your way through the minefields of Verdun.

'Sit down,' I repeated.

He did as I said and sat down on the edge of the sofa, gazing at his two gigantic hands. I suspected that he knew what was coming.

'Do you know what day it is today?' I said, without remorse.

'It's Thursday.'

'Thursday the fifteenth,' I persisted, 'which means that Frank is coming.'

He began to rub his temples with his fists. A sure sign of nervousness and guilt.

'I'm sorry,' I said, 'but I'll have to take the matter up with him. If you cannot stop this moronic sexlines stuff, we'll lose the telephone. That is, we won't be able to afford to keep it. It's as simple as that.'

His fists sank and he sat staring at them. 'Haven't phoned anyone.'

'No,' I said. 'You've phoned a recording. You've phoned a recording of a woman telling you that she's desperate for your body. That she's fantasizing about all the things you're going to do to her. I heard you last night! I heard you get up and fumble around with the telephone.'

He took a deep breath. 'Aw, don't tell Frank.'

His hangdog look was too much to bear. He reminded me of a cocker spaniel that had just had a steak whisked away from under his nose after fourteen days without food. All the same, this was not the time to go soft and give way. It was only after intensive telephone training that I had finally come to terms with this practical device and now I intended to keep it, whatever the cost. I had quite simply become a telephone man, and I was not prepared to let Kjell Bjarne ruin it all. The last telephone bill had been astronomical. We had to live on dry bread and instant soup for weeks. Frank said that it served us right, that it was the perfect way to learn. 'The choice is yours,' said Frank. 'Dirty talk or a decent meal. With the benefits you get, you could actually live quite well. It just depends on how you want to spend the money.'

And he was right. It was our responsibility. I had learnt that at Brøynes Rehabilitation Centre, where Kjell Bjarne and I first met.

That is, it was my responsibility. I held the purse strings in this two-man enterprise. Kjell Bjarne lost all control whenever he had money in his pocket. But, on the other hand, he was a good cook. He reigned supreme in the kitchen. I kept the accounts and Kjell Bjarne cooked and fried. It was as simple as that. When he was in a jocular mood, Frank used to call us 'the two thrifty bachelors'.

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Kjell Bjarne pleaded with me again not to tell Frank.

But I could promise him nothing. The role of telltale is absolutely alien to my nature, but as I saw it, this was not actually telling tales. It was about sticking to an agreement, and the agreement was that we would discuss any problems or grumbles with Frank, to clear the air so that we could get on with our normal lives and day-to-day reality. The telephone is a part of normal life. That's just the way it is.

It had taken a superhuman effort to crack this telephone thing. In all the years that Mother and I had lived in a kind of nerve-tingling twosomeness, she had played the role of spokeswoman whenever the outside world penetrated our reality or had to be contacted via old Mr Bell's invention. Personally I found it impossible to hold an intelligent conversation with someone I could not see. I was easily distracted as I stood there, trying hard to imagine what the other person looked like and what was happening in the room around them. If it was someone I knew, I ransacked my memory in order to reconstruct every detail of the person's face as closely as I could. And if it was someone I didn't know, everything went to pieces as my imagination ran completely amok. I simply could not relate to a disembodied voice. In order to understand what was being said, I had to be able to invoke a being of flesh and blood.

Once when I was alone at home, a woman from the social services called. In the end I just had to give up and put the receiver down. This was a shameful defeat that did not go unremarked. I just could not decide what she was wearing or what kind of hairstyle she had. Part of my brain conjured up an attractive young woman with dark hair cut in a page-boy style, a little delight fresh from college with a straight nose and full, red lips. Hungry and submissive at the same time. But then, another part of my brain superimposed a different image, one of a sweaty, leathery face. Open pores and unhealthy, pasty skin. Gimlet eyes peering at something that I could not see, but that I knew was indecent, even a bit threatening. A lewd sculpture from Ancient Greece that she kept on her desk, perhaps. As I said, I had to put the phone down, and then, to protect myself, I pulled out the telephone connection. I got a fearful telling-off when Mother came home and from that time on, I generally put my fingers in my ears whenever the phone rang.

However, with Frank's guidance, things improved considerably. He helped me to relax. He got me to play games with the telephone. The first thing we did was buy a ten-metre-long lead so that I could move around more freely with the phone, even take it with me from room to room. In all the years I lived at home, the telephone always had its fixed position - on a low table beside the television. The flex was just long enough to reach the socket in the wall. Mother and I would never have dreamt of imitating the telephone habits we were exposed to in American films, where people roamed restlessly from room to room, happily chatting away. Or they lay seductively draped over a pink quilt, sipping a Martini and talking to their loved one in Illinois.

Mother, who remembered when the telephone was first invented, maintained a deep respect for it for as long as she lived. Whenever the phone rang, she dropped

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everything and ran to pick it up, as if she were frightened to the very core of missing something vital. And when she spoke on the phone, she stood bolt upright until the conversation was finished. I never saw her sitting and talking on the telephone; in fact, I am sure she would have thought it disrespectful to Mr Bell, or maybe to the person at the other end of the line. Kjell Bjarne had not yet moved in when the telephone was installed in our new flat; so without giving it a second thought, I had copied the old set-up with the phone beside the television and a short flex. Kjell Bjarne took it for granted, as he did most things. I don't remember even discussing it.

To begin with, Frank made me do solo dry runs, made me pretend that I was talking to someone, pulling the long lead behind me from room to room. From the living room to the kitchen. From the kitchen to the bedroom. Naturally enough, I felt like an idiot, but I took care to wait until Kjell Bjarne was out of the house before starting to practise. Of course, he was aware of the problem I had - he knew what I was like. But I still thought it would be inappropriate for him to overhear the imaginary conversations I had with my deceased mother, or the father I had lost before I was even born. Not to mention my tirades against various politicians, or the tender words whispered to non-existent women. I wandered about shouting or cooing, depending on how the mood took me. And after a while, I began to like it.

Then phase two was introduced. Frank would ring me at an agreed time. To begin with I was stiff and tense and refused to utter a word, but gradually my jaws relaxed and the words started to slip out. Visiting Frank and seeing where the phone was in his study was a great help. The next time he rang, my mind was less cluttered. I could picture him clearly now as he spoke to me, sitting on his blue office chair by the desk, looking out over his garden with row upon row of apple trees. But Frank still thought that I put too much emphasis on details and said I would be better off trying to curb my imagination and train myself to concentrate on the conversation at hand. To listen to what was being said. So, after a while, he started to phone me arbitrarily from different phone boxes all over town. Slowly my phobia began to recede and now I was at the stage where my voice was remarkably firm whenever I spoke on the phone. I gave my full name, stated the purpose of my call, and listened attentively to what the person on the other end was saying. The very idea of breaking off the conversation midway and hanging up didn't cross my mind now, in fact, it seemed absolutely absurd.

I will admit that, to begin with, we both got excited about sex phone lines. While Kjell Bjarne and I were at the Brøynes Centre, this particular personal service had undergone terrific improvements and now that we had our own phone and no-one could catch us red-handed we simply succumbed to the temptation. As a matter of fact, there were two types of service. One where you could chat to a real live woman, and a slightly cheaper alternative where the woman's voice was recorded on a tape. Obviously, the first option was out of the question. We tried a couple of times with Kjell Bjarne doing the talking, but all he did was splutter and stammer. Not even he knew how to handle situations like this. But the recordings, well, we had a lot of fun with them for a while. With my somewhat overactive imagination, I had no problem whatsoever picturing Patricia lying on the sofa, groaning with pleasure as she plied bananas or any other object she had to hand. And the language those girls used! We blushed furiously as we sat there, heads close together, the receiver between us. One

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of them even used the telephone and we could hear the crackling sound of plastic against curly pubic hair and her crying out for more in a strangulated voice in the background. Kjell Bjarne and I were transfixed by lust.

But, as I said: one day the bill came. That was when it first dawned on me, and therefore also on Kjell Bjarne, precisely how disgusting it was and how degrading to women. Three thousand Norwegian kroner is a lot of money for two men living on social benefits, saving up for a video recorder. I worked out that we had set the video project back by half a year, and it was this that enabled Kjell Bjarne to see the seriousness of the situation. At least, that was what I thought. Until now.

'If you snitch on me to Frank, you can do your own cooking,' Kjell Bjarne threatened. ''Cause I'll move out.'

'If you don't stop that nonsense, neither you nor I will have anything to cook!' I countered. 'And where will you move to, when your bank account is overdrawn by a couple of thousand kroner? Not even the Salvation Army would have you. You're not an alcoholic. How long have you been doing this behind my back?'

'Haven't. Just couldn't sleep last night. It got me down. All the stupid things in my head.'

'So it was just this once? Tell the truth because you will be found out, anyway, when the bill comes.'

'Just this once . . . and then, once more.'

'Fine,' I said magnanimously. 'I won't say a thing. But you'll have to promise to talk to Frank about your stupid thoughts.'

'Why?' He glared at me, but I could tell that he was relieved.

'You have to find something else to do instead of listening to bloody expensive smut every time you get frightened,' I said.

'Wasn't frightened. Just mad at my mum.'

'Same thing. The unit cost is precisely the same whether you're frightened or angry. You could call the Christian helpline instead. It's free, I think.'

'Not really the same thing, though, is it.'

'Who knows,' I said. 'A lot has happened in the church since you and I were confirmed. If we are to believe what the papers say, there is a good chance you'll get a lesbian priest on the line and if you tell her about how mean your mother was, you may even get her to groan a little.'

We were blood brothers once more. We laughed the way blood brothers laugh. Loud, raucous laughter.

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Kjell Bjarne went out into the kitchen to make the food. I could hear him rummaging about the tins in the cupboard, mumbling to himself about lesbian priests.

'Meatballs or fishballs?'

'Meatballs and fishballs,' I yelled. For some reason I was in a daredevil mood and pranced around, swatting wildly with the newspaper.

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