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Fear Not

Written by Anne Holt

Translated by Marlaine Delargy

Published by Corvus

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ANNE HOLT

Fear Not

TRANSLATED BY MARLAINE DELARGY



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To Ann-Marie,
for fifteen wonderful years
of love and collaboration

PART I

Christmas 2008

The Invisible Child

It was the twentieth night of December.

One of those Saturday nights that promise more than they can deliver had imperceptibly slipped into the last Sunday of Advent. People were still moving from bar to bar and from pub to pub as they cursed the heavy snow that had moved in across Oslo without warning just a few hours earlier. The temperature had then crept up to three degrees above zero, and all that remained of the festive atmosphere was grey slush on top of the mounds of snow, and lakes of dirty water as it melted.

A child was standing motionless in the middle of Stortingsgate.

She was barefoot.

'When the nights grow long,' she sang quietly, 'and the cold sets in ...'

Her nightdress was pale lemon with embroidered ladybirds on the yoke. The legs beneath the nightdress were as thin as chopsticks, and her feet seemed to be planted in the slush. The skinny, half-naked child was so out of place in the image of the city at night that no one had noticed her yet. The Christmas party season was approaching its climax, and everybody was preoccupied with their own affairs. A half-naked, singing child on one of the city streets in the middle of the night became completely invisible, just like in one of the books the little girl had at home, where exciting animals from Africa were cunningly hidden in drawings of Norwegian landscapes, concealed among bark and foliage, almost impossible to spot because they didn't belong there.

'... then the little mummy mouse says ...'

Everyone was out to have a good time, and a few actually were enjoying themselves. Outside Langgaard's jewellers a woman was leaning against the security grille over the window as she stared at her

own vomit. Undigested, deep red raspberry jam oozed among the remains of spare ribs and fried beef, slush and sand. A gang of young lads whooped at her and sang dirty songs from the other side of the street, their voices off-key. They were dragging a wasted mate with them past the National Theatre, ignoring the fact that he had lost a shoe. Outside every bar smokers stood huddled against the cold. A salty wind from the fjord blew along the streets, blending with the smell of tobacco smoke, alcohol and cheap perfume; the smell of a Norwegian city night just before Christmas.

But nobody noticed the girl singing so quietly on the street, right in the middle of two shining silver tramlines.

'And the mummy mouse ... and the mummy mouse ... and the mummy mouse ...'

She couldn't get any further.

The Number 19 tram set off from the stop further up towards the Palace. Like a sleigh as heavy as lead, full of people who didn't really know where they were going, it accelerated slowly down the gentle slope towards the Hotel Continental. Some people hardly even knew where they had been. They were asleep. Others were rambling about going on somewhere, having a few more drinks, chatting up a few more girls before it was too late. Others simply stared blankly out into the thick warmth that settled on the windows like a damp, grey veil.

A man by the entrance to the Theatre Café looked up from the expensive shoes he had chosen for the evening in the hope that the snow wouldn't come just yet. His feet were soaked, and the marks left by the road salt would be difficult to get rid of when his shoes had finally dried out.

He was the first to see the child.

His mouth opened to shout a warning. Before he had chance to take a breath, he was pushed hard in the back, and it was all he could do to stay on his feet.

'Kristiane! Kristiane!'

A woman in national costume stumbled in her full skirt. Instinctively she grabbed at the man with the ruined Enzo Poli shoes. He hadn't properly regained his balance, and both of them fell over.

'Kristiane,' the woman sobbed, trying to get up.

The warning bell on the tram was clanging frantically.

The driver, who was coming to the end of an exhausting double shift, had finally spotted the girl. There was a screech of metal on metal as he slammed the brakes on as hard as he could on the wet, icy rails.

'... and the little mummy mouse says to all her babies,' sang Kristiane.

The tram was only six metres away from her and travelling at the same speed when the mother finally managed to get to her feet. She hurled herself into the road with her skirt half ripped off, stumbled but managed to stay upright, and screamed again:

'Kristiane!'

Afterwards someone would say that the man who appeared from nowhere resembled Batman. In which case it was due to his wide coat. He was, in fact, both short and slightly overweight, and bald into the bargain. Since everyone's eyes were on the child and the despairing mother, no one really saw how the man darted in front of the screeching tram with surprising agility. Without slowing down he scooped up the child with one arm. He had just cleared the line when the tram slid over the almost invisible footprints left by the child and stopped. A torn-off scrap of the dark coat flapped gently in the breeze, caught on the tram's front bumper.

The city let out a sigh of relief.

No cars could be heard; screams and laughter died away. The bell on the tram stopped clanging. The tram driver sat motionless, his hands on his head and his eyes staring. Even the little girl's mother stood there frozen to the spot a metre or so away from her, her party outfit ruined, her arms dangling helplessly by her sides.

'... if nobody gets caught in the trap,' Kristiane continued to warble, without looking at the man carrying her.

Someone tentatively began to applaud. Others joined in. The applause grew, and it was as if the woman in national costume suddenly woke up.

'Sweetheart!' she screamed. She dashed up to her daughter, grabbed her and clutched her to her breast. 'You must never do anything like that again! You must promise me that you'll never, ever do anything like that again!'

Johanne Vik raised one arm without thinking and without slackening her grip on her child. The man's expression didn't change as her

hand struck his cheek. Without paying any attention to the livid red marks left by her fingers, he gave a wry smile, inclined his head in a slow, deep, old-fashioned bow, then turned away and disappeared.

'... but steady as you go, soon everyone will be celebrating Christmas,' the child sang.

'Is it all right? Is everything OK?'

More and more people were pouring out of the Hotel Continental, all talking at the same time. Everyone realized that something had happened, but only a few knew what it was. Some were talking about someone being run over, others about an attempt to kidnap little Kristiane, the bride's sister's unusual child.

'Oh, sweetheart,' her mother wept. 'You mustn't do this kind of thing!'

'The lady was dead,' said Kristiane. 'I'm cold.'

'Of course you are!'

The mother set off towards the hotel, taking small, tentative steps to avoid slipping. The bride was standing in the doorway. Her strapless bodice was strewn with shimmering white sequins. Heavy silk fell in luxurious folds over her slender hips and down to her feet, where a pair of beaded shoes were still equally white and shimmering. The main focus of the evening was, as she should be, beautiful and perfectly made up, with her hair just as elegantly swept up as it had been when the reception started several hours earlier. The glow on the skin of her bare shoulders suggested she had been on her honeymoon in advance. She didn't even look cold.

'Are you OK?' she smiled, caressing her niece's cheek as her sister walked past.

'Auntie,' said Kristiane. 'Auntie Bride! You look so beautiful!'

'Which is more than you can say about your mother,' muttered the bride.

Only Kristiane heard her. Johanne didn't even glance at her sister. She hurried inside, into the warmth. She wanted to get to her room, crawl under the covers with her daughter, perhaps a bath, a hot bath. Her child was freezing cold and must be thawed out as soon as possible. She staggered across the floor, struggling to breathe. Even though Kristiane, who was almost fourteen, hardly weighed more than a ten-year-old, her mother was almost collapsing beneath her weight. In addition, her skirt was hanging down so much that she stood on it with

every other step. Her hair, which she had wound around her head in a braid, had fallen down. The style had been Adam's suggestion, and she had been sufficiently stressed in the hours before the wedding to take his advice. Just a few minutes into the celebrations she had felt like Brünnhilde in a production from the interwar years.

A well-built man came running down the stairs.

'What's happened? What ... is she OK? Are you OK?'

Adam Stubo tried to stop his wife. She hissed at him through gritted teeth:

'Stupid idea! We're ten minutes from home by taxi. Ten minutes!'

'What's a stupid idea? What are we ... ? Let me carry her, Johanne. You're dress is torn and it would be ...'

'It's not a dress! It's a national costume! It's called a kirtle! And it was your idea! This ghastly hairstyle and this hotel and bringing Kristiane with us. She could have died!'

She was overcome by tears, and slowly let go of her daughter. The man with the strong arms gently took the child, and together they walked up the stairs. Neither of them said anything. Kristiane carried on singing in her thin, pure voice:

'Hey hop fallerallera, when Christmas comes let every child rejoice!'

*

'She's asleep, Johanne. The doctor said she was fine. There's no point in going home now. It's ...'

The man glanced over at the silent TV screen, where the hotel was still welcoming Mr & Mrs Stubo.

'Quarter past three. It's almost half past three in the morning, Johanne.'

'I want to go home.'

'But ...'

'We should never have agreed to this. Kristiane's too young ...'

'She's almost fourteen,' said Adam, rubbing his face. 'It's hardly irresponsible to let a fourteen-year-old come to her aunt's wedding. It was actually incredibly generous of your sister to pay for a suite and a babysitter.'

'Some babysitter!' She spat out the words in a mist of saliva.

'Albertine fell asleep,' Adam said wearily. 'She lay down on the sofa

when Kristiane finally went to sleep. What else was she supposed to do? That was why she was here, Johanne. Kristiane knows Albertine well. We can't expect her to do any more than she was asked to do. She brought Kristiane up here after dessert. This was an accident, a sheer accident. You have to accept that.'

'An accident? Is it an accident when a child like ... like Kristiane manages to get out through a locked door without anyone noticing? When the babysitter – who, incidentally, Kristiane knows so well that she still refers to her as 'the lady' – is sleeping so heavily that Kristiane thought she was *dead*? When the child starts wandering around a hotel full of people? People who were drunk! And then wanders out into the street in the middle of the night without proper clothes and without any shoes and without ...'

She put her hands to her face, sobbing. Adam got up from his chair and sat down heavily beside her on the bed.

'Can't we go to bed?' he said quietly. 'Things will seem so much better in the morning. I mean, it all worked out fine after all. Let's be grateful for that. Let's get some sleep.'

She didn't respond. Her hunched back trembled every time she breathed.

'Mummy?'

Johanne quickly wiped her face and turned to her daughter with a big smile.

'Yes, sweetheart?'

'Sometimes I'm completely invisible.'

From the corridor came the sound of giggling and laughter. Someone was shouting 'cheers!' and a male voice wanted to know where the ice machine was.

Johanne lay down cautiously on the bed. She slowly caressed the girl's thin, fair hair, and put her mouth close to Kristiane's ear.

'Not to me, Kristiane. You are never invisible to me.'

'Oh yes I am,' said Kristiane with a little laugh. 'To you, too. I am the invisible child.'

And before her mother had time to protest – as the town-hall clock proclaimed that yet another half-hour had passed on this twentieth day of December – Kristiane fell into a deep sleep.

A Room with a View

As the town-hall clock struck half past three, he decided that enough was enough.

He stood by the window, looking out at what there was to see.

Which wasn't a great deal.

Ten hours earlier heavy snow had fallen on Oslo, making the city clean and light. In the empty silence of his office he had immersed himself so deeply in his work that he hadn't noticed the change in the weather. The city lay dark and formless below him. Although it wasn't raining, the air was so damp that water was trickling down the window panes. Akershus Fortress was discernible only as a vague shadow on the other side of the harbour. The grey, indolent crests of the waves were the only indication that the black expanse between Rådhuskaia and Nesodden, all the way out to Hurumlandet, was actually made up of fjord and sea.

But the lights were beautiful, street lamps and lanterns transformed into shimmering little stars through the wet glass.

Everything lay ready on his desk.

The Christmas presents.

A Caribbean cruise for his brother and sister and their families. On one of the company's own ships, admittedly, but it was still a generous gift.

A piece of jewellery for his mother, who would turn sixty-nine on Christmas Eve; she never tired of diamonds.

A remote-controlled helicopter and a new snowboard for his son.

Nothing for Rolf, as they always agreed and invariably regretted.

And 20,000 kroner to charitable causes.

That was everything.

The personal gifts were quickly dealt with. It had taken less than

half an hour with his regular jeweller in Amsterdam in November, a walk around a mall in Boston the same week, plus twenty minutes on the computer this evening to produce an attractive gift card for his brother and sister's families. There were plenty of tempting pictures of Martinique and Aruba on the shipping company's home pages. He was pleased with the result, and he managed to make it personal by lining up the entire family along the railing on board MS *Princess Ingrid Alexandra* at sunset.

It was the charitable donations that had taken time.

Marcus Koll Junior put his heart and soul into each donation. Dispensing generous gifts was his Christmas present to himself. It always did him good, and reminded him of his grandfather. The old man, who had been the closest thing to God that little Marcus could imagine, had once asked him the following question with a smile. A man helps ten other men who are in need, and takes the credit for doing so. A different man helps one other man in need, but keeps it to himself and gets no thanks for what he has done. Which of the two is the better person?

The ten-year-old replied that it was the first man, and had to defend his position. Marcus stuck to his guns for a long time: the intention of the donor was not the issue. It was the result that mattered. Helping ten people was better than helping one. The old man had stubbornly argued for the opposite point of view – until, at the age of fifteen, the boy changed his mind. Then his grandfather did the same. The argument continued until Marcus Koll Senior died at the age of ninety-three, leaving behind a well-organized life in a pale green folder with the logo of the Norwegian state railway on it. The documents showed that he had given away 20 per cent of everything he had earned throughout his adult life. Not 10 per cent, as was traditional within the labour movement, but 20. A fifth of his grandfather's earnings had been a gift to those worse off than himself.

Marcus looked through all the documents on the day his grandfather was buried. It was a journey in time through the darkest events of the twentieth century. He found receipts for deposits made to needy widows before the war and Jewish children after it. To refugees from Hungary in 1956. Save the Children had received a small amount each month since 1959, and his grandfather had made decent

donations after most disasters from 1920 onwards: shipwrecks in the years between the wars, the famine in Biafra, right up to the tsunami in Southeast Asia. He died on New Year's Eve 2004, only five days after the tidal wave, but had managed to get to the post office in Tøyen in order to send 5,000 kroner to Médecins Sans Frontières.

As a train driver with a wife who stayed at home, five children and eventually fourteen grandchildren, it couldn't have been particularly easy to nibble away at his wage packet and later his pension, year after year. But he never took any credit for it. The money had been paid at different post offices, always far enough away from his apartment in Vålerenga so that he wouldn't be recognized. The name of the donor was always false, but the handwriting gave him away.

His grandfather hadn't helped one person, he had helped thousands.

Just like his grandson.

Marcus Koll Junior's contributions to charity and research were of quite a different order from those of the old man. As was to be expected. He earned more in just a few weeks than his grandfather had in his entire life. But he imagined the joy of giving was just the same for both of them, and that there was no real answer to his grandfather's riddle. Sharing what you had was not a question of being noble for either man. It was simply about being contented with one's own life. And just as his grandfather had allowed himself the small vanity of letting his grandson know what he had done, when it was all over and the discussion had literally died, Marcus Junior also kept a detailed record of his donations. They were made with great discretion, through various channels which made it impossible for the recipient to identify the real donor. The money was a gift from Marcus himself, not from one of his companies; it was declared and taxed before he passed it on via circuitous routes that only he knew about. And nobody would know, apart from the youngest Marcus Koll, eight years old in two months, who would find out one day, when he turned thirty-five, what his father had been doing every night up to the last Sunday in Advent.

It usually brought him a sense of calm; the calmness he needed.

His heart was beating too fast.

He walked back and forth across the room. It wasn't particularly

large, and there was no evidence of the money generated behind the old oak desk. Marcus Koll's office was located on Aker Brygge, which had been an impressive address a couple of financial crises ago, but the area was no longer so desirable. Which suited Marcus very well.

He clutched his chest and tried to breathe slowly. His lungs had a will of their own, gasping for air much too quickly, his breathing much too shallow. It was as if he had been nailed to the floor. It was impossible to move: he was dying. His fingertips prickled. His lips were numb, and the stiffness in his mouth made his tongue feel huge and dry. He had to breathe through his nose, but his nose was blocked, he had stopped breathing, he would be dead in a few seconds.

He saw himself in a way that he had read about, a sensation he had experienced so many times before. He was standing outside his body, leaning slightly at an angle with something approaching a bird's-eye view, and he could see a stocky, 44-year-old man with bags under his eyes. He could smell his own fear.

A hot flush surged through his body, making it impossible for him to shake it off. He staggered over to the desk and grabbed a paper bag from the top drawer. He gathered the top loosely between his right thumb and forefinger, put the bag to his lips and breathed as deeply and evenly as he could.

The metallic taste didn't diminish.

He tossed the bag aside and rested his forehead against the window.

Not ill. He wasn't ill. His heart was OK, even though he had a stabbing pain beneath his left shoulder blade and in his arm – his left arm now that he thought about it. No, no pain.

Don't think about it.

Breathe.

His hands felt as if they were covered in tiny crawling insects and he didn't even dare to shake them off. His head felt light and alien, as if it didn't belong to him. His thoughts were whirling so fast that he couldn't catch them. Fragmented images and disjointed phrases kept spinning by on a carousel that made him sway. He tried to think of a recipe, a recipe for pizza, pizza with feta cheese and broccoli, an American pizza he had made thousands of times and could no longer remember.

Not ill. Not a brain haemorrhage. Not feeling sick. He was perfectly fine.

Perhaps it was cancer. He felt a stabbing pain in his right side, the side where his liver was, his pancreas, the side for cancer and disease and death.

Slowly he opened his eyes. A small part of his mind knew that he was fine. He must focus on that, not on forgotten recipes and death. The dampness on the window pane left its ice-cold impression on his forehead, and the tears began to flow.

It was becoming easier to breathe. His pulse, which had been pounding at his eardrums, against his breastbone, in the tips of his fingers and painfully hard in his groin, was slowing down.

Oslo still lay there on the other side of the window, outside this room with its view of the harbour, the fjord and the islands. Marcus Koll had just donated a fortune to charitable causes and he really wanted to feel the warmth that the last Sunday in Advent always gave him: the contented feeling of happiness because of Christmas, because of the gifts, because his son was looking forward to the holiday, because his mother was still alive, quarrelsome and impossible, because he had done the right thing, and because everything was as it should be. He wanted to think about his life which was not yet over, if he could just manage to calm his breathing.

Calm down. Just calm down.

He caught sight of someone out walking, one of the few people still wandering around down there on the quayside, apparently with no goal or purpose. It was almost five o'clock on Sunday morning. All the bars were closed. The man down below was alone. He was staggering from side to side, having difficulty staying upright on the slippery surface. Suddenly he took a couple of despairing steps off at an angle, grabbed hold of his hat as if it were a fixed point, and disappeared over the quayside.

Suddenly everything was different. His heart was beating normally once more. The pressure on his chest eased. Marcus Koll straightened his back and focused. It was as if his mucus membranes suddenly became slippery and smooth; his tongue shrank; his mouth was lubricated as it was meant to be. His thoughts gradually fell into line, one following the other in a logical sequence. He quickly worked out how long it would take him to get out of the office, down the stairs and over to the edge of the quayside. Before

he had finished he could see people running to the scene. Five or six men, including a Securitas guard, yelling so loudly that he could hear them from where he was standing, five storeys above them and behind a triple-glazed window. The uniformed man was already clambering down the side of the quay.

Marcus Koll turned away and decided to go home.

Only now did he realize how tired he was.

If he hurried he might manage three hours' sleep before the boy demanded his attention. It was Sunday, after all, and it would soon be Christmas. Presumably some of the snow that had fallen yesterday would still be lying on the hills around the city. They could go out. Skiing, perhaps, if they went far enough into Marka.

The last thing Marcus Koll did before leaving was to open the little jar of white, oval tablets in the top drawer. They were probably past their best-before date. It was such a long time ago. He tipped one of them into the palm of his hand. A moment later he put it back, screwed on the lid and locked the drawer.

It was over. For now.

The sirens were already approaching.

*

'Are the police on their way? Is that them? Has someone called an ambulance? Those sirens are the police, for God's sake! Call an ambulance! Give me a hand here!'

The security guard had one arm over the edge of the quayside. One foot was resting on a slippery crossbar no more than half a metre above the surface of the water. The other was dangling back and forth in a desperate attempt to keep the heavy body balanced.

'Grab hold of me! Get hold of my jacket!

A young lad lay down on his stomach in the slush and seized the guard's sleeves with both hands. His eyes were shining. He would be eighteen in a couple of months, but was blessed with dark stubble that made it possible for him to go from bar to bar all night without any questions being asked. He was broke, and had mostly stuck to finishing the dregs of other people's beer. Right now he felt stone-cold sober.

'That's not him,' he panted, getting a firmer grip. 'The guy who fell in is further out.'

'What? What the hell are you talking about?'

The guard stared at the body he was desperately trying to haul out of the water. He had a good grip on the collar, but the body inside the clothes was lifeless and as heavy as lead in the water, with the hood pulled up and fastened.

'Help,' someone yelled in the dark water further out. 'Help! I ...'

The cry died away.

The boy with the stubble let go of the guard.

'You'll have to hang on yourself!' he shouted. 'I'll get the other one!'

He stood up, kicked off his shoes, pulled off his padded jacket and dived into the dark water without hesitation. When he came up he was in the exact spot where he had seen the drunken man splashing around.

'Were there two of them? Did two people fall in? Did you see? Did anyone see?'

The guard was still hanging on with one arm over the quayside, bellowing. His other hand was clutching something that was definitely a body: a head facing away from him, two arms and a dark jacket. It was just so heavy. So bloody heavy. His arms were aching and he had no feeling in his fingers.

He didn't let go.

The young man who had just jumped in was gasping for air. The first paralyzing shock of the cold water had given way to an agonising pain so fierce that his lungs were threatening to go on strike. He was treading water so frenetically that half his body was above the surface. Beneath him he could see nothing but a dark, colourless depth of water.

'There!' shouted an out-of-breath police officer from the quay.

The boy turned around and made a grab. He couldn't actually see anything. It was more of a reflex action. His fingers closed around something and he pulled. The half-drowned drunk broke the surface of the water with a roar, as if he had already started screaming underwater. His rescuer had a firm hold on his hair. The drunk tried to wrench himself free and clamber on top of the younger man at the same time. Both of them disappeared. When they came up a few seconds later, the older man was lying on his back, his arms and legs outstretched on the water. He screamed with pain as his rescuer

refused to let go of his hair, and, in fact, clutched it more tightly as he wound a rope four times around his other arm, without considering where it had come from.

'Have you got it?' shouted the police officer up above. 'Can you hold on?'

The boy tried to answer, but ended up with a mouthful of water. He managed to give a sign with the arm that was attached to the rope.

'Pull,' he groaned almost inaudibly, swallowing even more water.

Never in his life had he imagined that the cold could be so intense. The water seared its way into every pore. Needles of ice pierced him all over. His temples felt as if someone were trying to push them into his brain, and it seemed as if his sinuses were packed with ice. He could no longer feel his hands, and for one moment of pure, sheer terror he thought his testicles had disappeared. His crotch was on fire, a paradoxical warmth spreading from his balls and out into his thighs.

He was finding it more difficult to move. He knew his eyes were dead. Somebody must have unscrewed them. There was nothing but wetness, cold and darkness. It couldn't have been more than a minute since he dived in, but it occurred to him that this was the last thing he would ever experience, losing his balls in the depths of the December sea, because of some fucking idiot on Aker Brygge.

Suddenly he was out.

He was lying on the ground on a blanket that looked as if it were made of aluminium foil, and somebody was trying to remove his clothes.

He held on tight to his trousers.

'Take it easy,' said a police officer, presumably the same one that had thrown the rope. 'We need to get those wet clothes off. The paramedics will soon be here to look after you.'

'My balls,' whimpered the boy. 'And my fingers, they ...'

He turned away. Two police officers – the place was crawling with them now – were just laying a person down on the ground a few metres away. Streams of water poured from the figure as they struggled, but he didn't move. As soon as they had put him down, an ambulance driver came running over with a trolley. The older police officer pushed him away when he tried to help move the body again.

'He's dead. Look after the living.'

'Fuck,' groaned the boy. 'He's dead? He didn't make it?'

'He's not the one you saved,' the police officer said calmly, still struggling to undress the boy. 'I think it was too late for him. Your man is over there. The one who's put his hat back on.'

He grinned and shook his head. His movements were rapid, and soon the reckless young man realized his sexual organs were still intact. He gave in and allowed himself to be undressed. Three police officers were busy cordoning off the area with red-and-white tape, and one of them placed a tarpaulin over the body on the trolley.

'H-h-h-hey you there,' said the man in the hat, moving closer. 'W-w-w-w-were you trying to sc-sc-scalp me?'

He was still fully dressed. Someone had placed a woollen blanket around his shoulders. Not only were his teeth chattering, but his entire body was shaking, droplets of water cascading from the clumps of hair sticking out from beneath his sodden hat.

The boy on the ground didn't remember any hat.

'I s-s-s-s-saved my hat,' the other man grinned. 'I h-h-h-held on to it as hard as I could.'

'Shift yourself,' the police officer said wearily. 'Over there!'

He pointed to an ambulance parked at an angle on the quayside, casting its blue flashing light across the melee of uniformed figures.

'Who-who-who's that?' asked the man, completely unmoved as he gazed with interest at the lifeless form on the stretcher. 'I d-d-d-didn't s-s-s-see h-h-h-him in the wa-wa-water.'

'That's nothing to do with ... Arne! Arne, can you take this guy over to the ambulance? He's pushing his luck here.'

The shivering man was led away to the ambulance with a certain amount of brute force.

'He could at least have thanked you,' said the police officer, waving over one of the paramedics. 'It was pretty brave, jumping in like that. Not everybody would have had the courage. Over here!'

He stood up and placed his hand on the shoulder of a man in a high-visibility yellow uniform.

'Look after our hero,' he said with a smile. 'He needs warming up.'

'I'll just go and get another stretcher. Two seconds and ...'

The boy shook his head and tried to get to his feet. He was naked beneath a thick blanket, and without his even noticing somebody had

pushed his feet into a pair of trainers that were far too big. The paramedic grabbed him under one arm as he swayed.

'I'm fine,' mumbled the boy, pulling the blanket more tightly around him. 'I'm just so fucking cold.'

'I think we'd be better with a stretcher,' the paramedic said doubtfully. 'It's just ...'

'No.'

The boy wobbled towards the ambulance. When he had almost reached the edge of the quay, he stopped for a moment. The salty gusts of wind blowing in from the fjord suddenly made him realize how close he had been to death. He was on the point of bursting into tears. Embarrassed, he pulled the blanket over his eyes. He had to take a little sidestep, and tripped over the edge of the blanket. In order to keep his balance, he grabbed hold of the nearest thing. It was the tarpaulin covering the body on the stretcher.

Things took a definite turn for the worse.

It couldn't have been more than five minutes since he came ambling along Aker Brygge, alone, fed up and with no money for a taxi home. During those paltry 300 seconds he had swum in icy water, been certain he was going to die, saved a man from drowning, been praised by the police and almost frozen to death. In that same period of time, two fully equipped ambulances and three police cars containing a total of six uniformed officers had arrived at the scene. Which was almost incomprehensible, given the brief time span. In addition, as soon as he was pulled up on to the quay and the police had taken responsibility for the lifeless body he had held in a grip of iron, the security guard had called in no less than five of his colleagues from the nearby office buildings.

In the midst of this chaotic crowd of uniformed men and one lone woman, some thirty members of the public were milling about, all in various states of intoxication and all paying little attention to the temporary police cordon. Those who were still around in the early hours of this Sunday morning were drawn to the dramatic scene like moths to a flame. And since no more than five minutes had passed since Aker Brygge had been more or less deserted, the police had yet to grasp the connection between the security guard, the young swimmer, the drunk in the hat and the dead body that two of them

had struggled to haul out of the water. The police had their procedures, of course, but it was dark, it was chaos, and the most important thing had been to get the drunk out of the water alive. For that reason, and perhaps also because one of their own had managed to fall in while they were heaving the body out, only two officers had taken a closer look at the corpse. One of them, a young man, was bent over and throwing up ten or fifteen metres beyond the cordon without anyone even noticing.

The other had covered the body and was quietly explaining the situation to a detective inspector when the young man with the stubble lost his balance due to sheer exhaustion.

He fell backwards. His blanket started to slip off. For a little while he was more preoccupied with not revealing his nakedness than regaining his balance, so he grabbed hold of the tarpaulin with both hands as he fell. It had got stuck on the far side of the trolley, which started to tip over. For a moment it looked as if the weight of the corpse would be enough to prevent total disaster, but the boy didn't let go. He went down wearing nothing but the oversized trainers. The back of his head struck the icy ground with an audible thud. The pain made him cry out, then he lost consciousness for a couple of seconds.

When he came round, he noticed the smell first of all.

Something was lying on top of him, something that was suffocating him, taking his breath away with the stench of rotten flesh and sewers. Someone screamed and it occurred to him that he ought to open his eyes. The corpse was lying in perfect symmetry with his own body, as if in a kiss of death, and he found himself staring straight into the opening in the hood.

There was something in there that from a purely logical point of view had to be a head.

After all, it was inside the hood of a padded jacket.

In the police report which would be written some hours later it would emerge that for the time being the police were assuming that the body had been in the water for approximately one month. In the same report they would stress the fact that in all probability it was the clothes that were holding the body together, by and large. From a purely clinical point of view the corpse would be described as 'badly swollen, partly disintegrating', whereupon the writer of the report

briefly pointed out that it was impossible to establish with any certainty whether it had been a man or a woman. However, the clothes might possibly indicate the former.

The boy, who had spent the whole of Saturday night trailing round Oslo in his quest for girls and booze, and who had thrown himself fearlessly into the fjord in the middle of winter to save another person's life, passed out once more. This time he remained unconscious for a considerable period; he didn't come round until he was lying in a bed in the hospital at Ullevål, his mother sitting beside him. He started to cry as soon as he saw her. The poor lad sobbed like a child, clinging tightly to her warm, safe embrace as he tried to suppress the memory of the last thing he had seen before the blessed darkness had borne him away from the sea monster.

From a hole in the formless mass, right where there had once been an eye, a fish had suddenly poked its head out. A tiny shimmering silver fish, no bigger than an anchovy, with black eyes and quivering fins; they had stared at one another, the boy and the fish, until it suddenly flicked its body and fell from the dead head, straight into the boy's bellowing mouth.