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The Flood

From the book ONCE THEY WERE WOLVES

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It had been raining and thundering for ten days. The houses around his stood empty and dark, the damp lay like a coating on his skin and made it difficult to breathe. Maybe he and Inger-Marie were the only ones left in the village, he thought. Or maybe the people in Flata were still there. They'd be liable to stay and could always take the road over the mountains if things got too bad.

Once the worst of the thunder had passed, he walked carefully across the yard in his rain gear wearing the rubber boots he used for fishing. The earth was saturated with moisture. With every step he took it bounced beneath his feet. Although it was only a slight tilting, he felt as if he might fall at any moment. Plummet all the way down the valley to the river.

The rain against his hood drowned out his thoughts and he concentrated on where he was walking. Now and then his boot got stuck and the ground made a wet, sucking sound when he pulled it out. At the bottom of the garden, down by the flagpole, he could see most of the village on a clear day. On the northern side of the property was the start of the road he'd planned to lay. It stopped after a few metres where the spruce forest stood, dense and dark green, barring the way. When he came to the fence, he smelt a faint waft of spoilt meat through the rain. And there they lay at the edge of the forest, several large dead birds, bellies bloated. They must have flapped straight into the trees. Or maybe the wind had dragged them along with it. When he saw them, something shifted in him and he looked away. Over where the garden gave way to forest lay several birds, small blackbirds and some larger ones. Their powerful feet lay to the side or stuck straight up into the air; they were half-hidden beneath branches and twigs as if they were trying to hide. They must be cranes.

It was a week since people had packed their things into the back of their cars and headed off; since helicopters had droned over the rooftops and the radio had said people had to leave, that it wasn't safe to stay. It was a week since his brother had stood in his kitchen. Water dripped from him and he said they should leave at once. He'd never seen his brother so worked up before. They hadn't spoken since.

Inger-Marie's pink bike was slung over the other side of the fence. A big black stone lay weighing down its back wheel. The water found its way everywhere, streams had turned into creeks running down the valley; anything that wasn't tethered down got dragged along with it.

His body was dripping under his rain gear, everything was wet. It was like walking around on the bottom of a lake. He walked along the fence to the point where he could see a stretch of the river down at the bottom of the valley. As he walked, he heard a couple of dogs howling and barking. He knew where the sounds were coming from but he didn't plan on going over that way, didn't plan on getting mixed up in other people's choices. He was surprised Sætre hadn't taken them with him, or shot them before he left. Leaving the dogs there so that their howls sliced through the air, it felt like one last prank he'd played on him.

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On the days when the storm raged, the flies were aggressive. They laid eggs in the walls, there were masses of them – the moisture drove them out. They weren't like normal flies: these ones fastened themselves to your skin and sucked your blood. They were slow and easy to kill but there were just so many of them. Dead flies lay in the corners and on the windowsill. The day his brother came, Tor was standing in the kitchen making soup, a thin stew from a packet with extra carrots in. Every time he moved, the flies took off, then settled elsewhere. As soon as he stood still they fastened themselves to his skin and sucked his blood. For every fly he swatted, more came. They'd been woken from their hibernation between the wall planks.
As he stood chopping, he heard the distant drone of a car coming up the hills and recognised it at once as his brother's pick-up. He wasn't sure what it was

he recognised. The engine in high gear, perhaps, the slightly “showy” driving style, a fan belt that’d been loose for ages, but he was never wrong.
The car shifted into lower gear as it came up the last hill, the drone of the engine stopped, the car door slammed and then heavy footsteps came in through the door.
What’s up? said Tor.
Halgeir stood there in the doorway, hood over his head, face grimy, an expression on his face like their father’s. He scraped his shoes clean and stepped inside.
You seen what it’s like out there? he said.
It was dark outside the windows, even though it was midday and the lightest time of year. The water struck the windowpanes, washing them to a sheen.
No need to look out. I can feel it in my bones, said Tor.
His brother took off his rain jacket and hung it on the chair. It dripped on the floor. He sat down heavily.
Us lot’ve decided to head off, he said.
You have? said Tor. How far d’you reckon you’ll go?
South to Hamar first – to Jorunn’s parents. Then we’ll see how things work out.
His brother looked helpless, Tor thought.
Some way off, they heard the drone of a helicopter. They’d been in the air the past couple of days, transporting people who were cut off from the road. But that was on the other side, where there’d been lots of landslides, and down in the centre of the village where the river had swollen and laid itself over the railway track and part of the main road, the E6. Things were different here.
Probably makes sense, he said.
You and Inger-Marie ought to leave too, said his brother.
He sat resting his elbows on his knees. Water ran from his hair and nose. He looked tired.
Tor mulled it over.
It won’t come here. It’s solid ground here, he said.
He had food enough for many weeks. Crates of beer and soft drinks, dried milk and canned goods, rice and potatoes.

It went quiet. Then his brother said in that low voice.
It's not you I'm thinking of, Tor. For Inger-Marie's sake you need to pack up and leave, soon as possible. Fact is, you're responsible for her, and that changes everything.
He looked down as he spoke. Then he swatted his arm, where a fly was stuck fast, sucking away. It fell to the ground
It's safe as can be here, and it'll soon pass, said Tor.
He'd warned his brother when he built his house on the lot down by the big creek. He should have built it up on high ground instead. A little while back, Tor had met a geologist who'd confirmed what he already knew: that this was a smart place to settle. And yet here was Halgeir, sitting in front of him being a know-it-all.
You must've heard what they're saying, said his brother. The ones who stay here now, they won't be able to do anything for them.
Tor sighed. Yeah, they would say that – they've got to find something to scare us with, haven't they, he said.
A loud crash of thunder slammed the house, as if somebody was listening to his talk. The rain droned and seethed on the roof above them. They both jumped.
Let me take Inger-Marie, so's she can be with her cousins. Then you can come along after, if things get worse.
He didn't look at Tor as he spoke, just looked down.
That's enough, now, said Tor.
Talk of the devil, said his brother, nodding towards the stairs.
Inger-Marie was sitting with her face pressed against the bars of the bannister, silent. God knows how long she'd been there, small and thin, dressed in her Red Indian pyjamas.
Are you going away? she asked. His brother nodded.
We're heading off for a few days, he said.
Her gaze was empty, her hair white and unkempt around her little face.
Synne and Markus too? she said.
The whole lot of us, he said. We'd like to have you along with us as well.
Her eyes sought out her father.
He looked out of the window and drank his coffee.

I'm not going anyplace, said Tor. But Inger-Marie, you're a big girl now: d'you want to go with your uncle. You can decide for yourself now, see.
She looked at them, first one then the other. Impossible to know what she was thinking.
Oh, come on, now! said his brother. Same old Tor.
I'm just trying to do what's best for everyone, he said. There was a pain in his chest.
What d'you think? he said to Inger-Marie. She looked from one to the other. Nobody said anything. His brother was red in the face.
I'm staying here with you, she said in low voice.
His brother had already got up. He stood there towering in the little room. He was almost a head taller than Tor. He looked around with those heavy eyes of his.
If you lot don't come now, there's nobody can come for you after, he said once again.
Yes and why d'you reckon that is? Tor asked him. So they can seal the whole village off and cart us away like cattle!
You're such a coward. Halgeir said it quietly. Then he went out of the door, silence fell, and after that they heard the car going down the steep hills.
Inger-Marie didn't stir. The house was wrapped up in the rainstorm; the sound of the helicopter was a long way off now.
Is it really safe here? she asked. She came over slowly and stood in the doorway. The smell of soup spread through the room.
Don't go listening to your uncle, he said. Our house is on rocky ground and so's the whole area round here.
But if everybody goes, won't we be left almost on our own here, just us two? she said.
It's only the people in the centre who have to leave, he said. There's lots of people staying.
He set the saucepan down on the table, put a sheet of flatbread down beside it.
There, come and eat now, he said.

She looked at the soup, said nothing. It's all we've got, he said and put two dishes down on the table, then switched off the radio, which stood there humming.
You've got to eat, he said to Inger-Marie. Get some flesh on those bones of yours.
Her disgust showed in her face as she looked down at the soup; she bent her neck, dipped her spoon in carefully to collect some stock, then picked out a carrot and slurped down the liquid.

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At first they thought it was a good thing; that the wet weather was good for the farmers, that the fields needed rain after so many weeks without. It'd been so humid in the days before. His brother and the kids drove over, they set up the water sprinkler and the white sun sliced through the water like a knife. Inger-Marie took off her clothes and flew out to dance around in the glittering yard, her and the cousins, stark naked. He and his brother sat on the porch and cackled as they watched them. Those white bodies in the sun, they were like joyous apes hopping around out there
That day, it was as if something oppressive lay in the air, waiting to be unleashed. The banks of clouds piled up higher and higher above the mountains and fells, and little by little the sun vanished and it grew dark even though it was midday. That was how he remembered it: the little girls, squealing and screeching on the flagstones, and that it clouded over, dense, dark-grey clouds that laid themselves before the sun and wouldn't disperse. Then came the thunder cracks, first at regular intervals then building up. One flash was followed by another and the water poured down. After that, it happened fast. The meagre streams became swollen with water, rose up like boiling gruel. Old rubbish and twigs were swept away and carried down to the river that ran through the valley. They lived on a slight incline a good way above the E6, half a kilometre from Gunnar creek, which had a tendency to make new routes for itself when it overflowed its banks. But there'd never been a landslide where he and Inger-Marie lived, the old people knew it and the geologist had confirmed it. It was stone there. Ages back, he'd offered to

let his brother build at the bottom of his garden – there was plenty of room. But no, they just had to live in the centre.

A feeble glimmer of light lay across the bottom of the lawn; the sky was dark. Not a sound to be heard but the steady trickle of the rain. Not an animal, not an insect. Mountains towered on either side of the valley, but here where they lived it opened up and spread out, the hillsides no longer as steep; they had air and a view. Here their family had lived for generations, since the days when menfolk were ten centimetres shorter and half the brood died before they were five. Here his grandparents had lived, here his parents and now here he stood, the only one; the one who could point to a crevice at the far end of the valley and say: there, there's where that Anna Dalom and her son and husband fled up to the mountain after fifty ewes and lambs were swept away by the landslide. Her with her diabetes, she had to take along a little stool to rest on. There, in the car park by the church where the water's already high, there's where my mother was born, in a tiny little cottage, and there's where the Germans came in during the war. There's where the road goes that I would've built if it hadn't been for that damned idiot Sætre, whose head I'd happily rip off and stuff up his arse if I happened to meet him. Imagine spending your life ruining things for other people.

He took out the binoculars and pointed them towards the centre. He couldn't see a lot through the fog bank – but what he could see, my God. It looked as if the water had already covered a lot of the buildings, the railway tracks, the E6; a grey-brown surface around by the school and the petrol station. On the plot nearest Gunnar creek the flagstaff stuck up, its flag still hanging there like a wet strap. Those people hoisted the flag on the slightest pretext. Half of the house and the veranda overhung the hollowed-out creek. Soil and gravel, stones and trees covered the land on either side of the village. After the great flood in 1789, it'd taken generations to get the soil fit for planting again, and that's how it was in 34 too, when the creek broke its banks, and in 38 when the river overflowed. But the people of the village had managed: they'd carted away stones, transported topsoil over long distances, they'd built and ploughed. In the book about the flood, written a generation after the events, it talked about all the farms that couldn't be cultivated again, that couldn't be cultivated for an eternity. But they'd managed it. Tor knew what would happen

this time: the authorities would close the whole village off and build a power plant across the river from the mountain. Now the oil industry was being phased out, they were building hydroelectric power stations across the whole goddamned country. For them, the flood was probably nothing short of a blessing, giving them a good excuse to move people out.
Nobody could make head or tail of the weather. If it ain't come yet, we been spared, old Olafsen used to say when it was getting towards midsummer. That's the way things used to be. But this winter it'd been terribly cold and the frost sat in the ground so there wasn't room for any more moisture, and there was flooding and the river through the valley became huge and green and swollen with glacial water from the mountains, and then the landslides started. There was no end to it, no end to it, there was never any end to it.
I am not going nowhere, said Olafsen to the TV crew who'd struggled up the hills to interview him out in his little yard on the slope. He did his best to talk posh for the camera, glaring defiantly into its lens. Tor cackled when he saw that. But the day his brother left, he saw Olafsen on his way out of the house and into a car, walking hunched between two lads from the home guard with his jacket slung over his back, as if he was just going out for a car ride, as if he thought he'd be coming home again.

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Although he hadn't been gone more than a quarter of an hour, there was nothing for it but to go back inside. The garden he and Monica had made so pretty was a muddy hole; the fence hung and swung. He walked up slowly and it gurgled every time he drew one of his boots up from a filthy hollow; now and then he stuck fast and had to haul them up by force. It felt like an eternity before he got to the upper side of the white-painted house.
When he came into the little hallway, he stood there listening. The shoes were neatly lined against the wall, the jackets hung on the pegs and there was a basket stuffed full of hats and mittens. In the corner stood Inger-Marie's umbrella, nestled against his own black one.

Ever since Monica died he'd been grief-stricken, and he'd seen how his mood infected Inger-Marie. Her gait changed the minute she came in from outside. She bowed her neck, her mouth small and tight.
For two years, he'd gone around thinking the worst had already happened, the best was past and there was nothing to do but hold out and wait. He had no one to share his thoughts with and Inger-Marie wriggled away whenever he began to talk, looked at him like a stranger.
Maybe he more than anybody else was ready for the darkness that entered the buildings, entered their house and laid itself in every corner. If it hadn't been for his daughter, he'd have gone out into the dark and the water and let it embrace him. He should've sent her away at once, it would've been better for both of them. He hung up his wet clothes, dried himself off and went upstairs to the second floor. He heard voices as he stood outside her door: mumbling interspersed with a little laughter, as if her cousins had come to stay. He stood there for a while then opened the door and stuck his head in. She sat on the floor in the middle of the room, alone, totally absorbed in her own game. Around her lay the buttons from Monica's sewing basket, big and small. The sewing machine still stood in a corner, and in the basket beside it lay scraps of different fabrics. Inger-Marie pushed the buttons towards each other, making up voices for them. When he saw it, he was so surprised he laughed out loud. The little body gave a start and stared at him with wild eyes. Then a shadow settled over her face.
That's a nice game you're playing, he said – tried to say it in a light, relaxed way. She drooped her head so her straight white hair covered her face, and he stood there helplessly, thinking he should say something else but not knowing what it should be. He was frightened by what he saw; she was vanishing into a world where there was no room for anybody else, and he said nothing, shut the door quietly behind him and went down the stairs.
Sometimes he sat and watched her from a distance when she didn't know he was looking, and she was so like her mother – a frailer build but just as fair, with freckles on her nose. When she was busy with her own things, she could be totally calm. If she realised he was looking at her, she'd start with that head tremor, a movement so small you could only see it when you got up close. He noticed it especially when she was with other children, the way she stood out

from them, from her cousins and the ones in her class. She hunched her shoulders forward and stood there expectantly, looking on, twisting a strand of hair or touching her nose like some strange woodland creature. Lately, she'd got into a bad habit of sticking out her chin and wobbling it ever so slightly. He'd see it and when he asked her to stop, she'd look away and carry on. It was enough to drive him crazy and he got angry, he couldn't help himself, even though he knew his anger only made matters worse.

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The feeble light in the sky had settled against the lowermost part of the dark green mountain. Normally, he'd have watched the news now, but the internet had packed in a few days before. He didn't have a clue any more how things looked outside the village, across Norway. Before the internet went down there were flood warnings for the whole of the northwest, and most of Oslo was under water. All the emergency services, army and volunteers had been mobilised. People were being transported to safe places in trucks and helicopters. He'd brought equipment in from the garage – chipboard, rejects he'd got from the factory – and now he stood and hammered the boards over the windows, one after another. Now only the big ones were left.
The hammering gave him a headache. He was too thin-skinned, lacked endurance, but he gritted his teeth and carried on. If they got the windows covered they'd be safer if a landslide came from the mountain above him.
It was Monica who'd insisted they should have big windows facing the valley. They let in light, and they needed light, she said. And that view, she said, throwing out her arms, as if she'd just arrived in the village, as if she'd just popped in for a visit.
The windows let in the cold too, and it's a long winter, he said.
That's as may be, but we need light, she said, and she stood there looking at him and she was in a good mood regardless of what she was demanding of him. She had a lightness about her that she used to spread around her and it was worth a lot, that. They said the people in the uplands were heavy and slow, they didn't talk so much, but she wasn't like that at all.

At first, he'd taken care of her clothes, sniffed them; nothing existed but his nose against her jumper, the jumper that had lain against her neck and back, that her hair had rested upon, and the knowledge that he'd never have more than that, a soft fabric that he held against his face, burrowed into.
One day, he realised he couldn't carry on like this; there was a membrane or a veil between him and his surroundings. He wasn't seeing clearly, wasn't managing to keep track of Inger-Marie – he'd be lost in his own thoughts, and suddenly, she'd have been out of his sight for a long time without him knowing where she was or what she was doing. So he took action, stowed Monica's things away in a little closet in the room where she used to sit sewing: cardboard boxes full of clothes and shoes, dresses and coats. God in heaven – she had so many clothes. Things went better, he thought, the months went by, he started to get things in order, a year went by. And then suddenly it wasn't going so well any more. Although she vanished from his nights, she turned up in the daytime, often behind him, at a slightly oblique angle, a shadow he could see only out of the corner of his eye. When he turned towards the spot where she was standing, she vanished from his sight.
You're going crazy, his brother said. You need to cut down on the booze.
He was sorry he'd said anything to him. It was nothing to do with the alcohol. She came and went, came and went, and he didn't have any control over it.
A light flared up in the blackness, followed at once by a rumbling in the walls around him. He let out a sharp burst of laughter and dropped the hammer on the floor. That'll make a dent in the parquet, he thought, and said: Makes no difference. At first, he thought it was the thunder rumbling, that there'd been a lightning strike nearby. But the movement outside didn't stop. He stood thinking for a while and came to a realisation. Oh hell, he said. What he could hear was the sound of Gunnar Creek. The rumble of boulder striking boulder, twigs, large branches and trees fighting their way down along what was now a river. The dam up towards Flata must have collapsed and now the water from the mountain was flowing down through the creek. He went into the kitchen, walked over to the kitchen window and opened it; the drops soaked his arms and face, and he stared out.
His pulse rose, his arms grew numb, his blood retreated into his body and his heart beat at a wild pace as if to drown out everything that was happening

outside his body; as if the rumbling of the river and his heart were one and the same. If he could hear the water of the creek all the way up here, it must be coming from somewhere else too. All he could see was a glint here and there in the darkness, but now he realised what was happening: stone after stone was loosening and coming through his garden. The water had found new paths, on either side of the garage, it seemed, across the yard and around the house. He tugged the window shut and fastened the catch, then walked over, opened the outer door and stood leaning against the doorframe. He turned on hearing a creak inside. Inger-Marie was standing looking at him, her hair unwashed and flat around her pale face. She was wearing one of her party dresses. She looked frightened.

The house is built on rock, he said.

She just stood there, didn't answer.

Come here, he said and when she went over, he squatted down, took her hands and held them tightly in his own.

That means it'll all be fine, Inger-Marie.

Where are Synne and Markus now? she asked.

They've gone to Hamar for a while.

Where's everyone in my class?

He said he didn't know, that there was water in a lot of places, but they'd probably managed to get to somewhere safe.

But why's there so much water? she asked.

I don't know. It happens once in a long while. My great-grandfather said it happened to him, but I never thought it'd happen in our lifetime.

Before they all went away, a child died, she said.

He nodded. He knew who she was talking about. A three-year-old. The father was in town working and the mother was alone with the boy when their house was taken by the landslide on the other side.

The mummy died and the kid died, said Inger-Marie.

She looked cold with those bare arms.

I heard the daddy doesn't want to live any more. He just wants to die, him too. He just sat and cried, she said.

It may be he felt that way, said Tor. But let's hope he'll get over it.

How can people get happy again? said Inger-Marie.

I don’t know, he said.

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He wandered around the house for a long time that evening, stared out at the dark and thought: now the end is coming, and afterwards there’s nothing, black. He drank and pondered, lost track of things entirely, sat for a long time on the sofa with his head in his hands, and he totally forgot about Inger-Marie as he sat there. Then he went carefully up the stairs and when he came into her room, there she lay without a duvet, arms beneath her, bottom in the air and dress rucked up around her waist. She was hot in the face and all down her back, and he wondered how he’d make it up to her, everything – the business with Monica, with himself, all the nonsense he’d fed her. Hardly surprising she couldn’t be bothered to listen to him, hardly surprising she vanished into her own world.

In the end, he must have fallen asleep on the sofa. It felt as if everything was floating inside him. Glints of light from the sky, the thunder that made the earth shake. Nothing was fixed any more. He woke up freezing, his neck stiff, a wet patch of drool on his jacket. It took some time for him to work out where he was. Then he saw the nailed-shut window, then he heard the steady drone of the rain on the roof, then he realised that this wasn’t a dream, that everyone was gone, that only they were left.
Inger-Marie stood by the big window, as if somebody had set her down there, her dress crumpled.
“Look, there’s been a landslide! She said. It wasn’t easy to tell if she was excited or frightened.
He went over and stood behind her. Most of the windowpane was covered in birch leaves, and there were holes smashed at the bottom; water had run in through the cracks, spreading across the floor. It was dark, with just a faint light, a thin crack somewhere high up in the sky. The veranda was covered in clay and stones, and the raw stench seeped in to them. The neighbour’s birch, which he’d nagged him to cut down for years because the shadow from the tree hung over his house like a sentinel, lay with its roots in the air and the

other end on his veranda. But the house still stood – not because it was built on solid ground but because they'd been lucky. For once, he'd been lucky. It was enough to make you laugh.

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He went down to the cellar and brought up the last remaining tins of food, the tools and the pitiful remnants of their potato store. He brought up his last remaining crates of beer. Filthy water had forced its way in through the small windows high up on the wall in the cellar room that had been Inger-Marie's until recently. He stood in the doorway, looking in. The bright yellow walls had ugly stains where the water was seeping in. He'd taken the duvet and pillows up to the second floor several days earlier, to the room beside his own. Inger-Marie had carried up her own clothes and cuddly toys.
The rest of the afternoon he spent hammering chipboard over the other windows. All except the kitchen window. He wouldn't be able to breathe in there without an opening to the outside. He drank a beer, then another beer. Went out, stood on the steps and pissed in the rain. It seemed a touch milder and he felt a prickling in his body and it was just as damp inside as out, impossible to breathe.
Come and get dressed, he called up the stairs.
No answer.
Then in the end, she drifted slowly down.
Get dressed, he repeated. Then us two'll go out and take a look around.
It was as if something shifted inside her and suddenly she became chatty.
Where'll us go?
Just for a little walk, he said.
Are you taking your rifle? she asked.
Thought I might, he said.
His rifle stood upright against the wall.
Are you going hunting, p'raps?
He didn't answer, hurried her up, hung his binoculars around his neck, put on his rain gear, pulled his hood down over his forehead and tied the drawstring.

Inger-Marie sat on the floor and with big hectic movements she pulled on her little waterproofs, grabbed her umbrella and they set off, down through the garden to the lookout point – taking a different way across the lawn so she wouldn't see the birds.
He bent his neck and looked down at his green rubber boots. He remembered a story from the summer of the landslide more than two hundred years earlier, when the village was almost wiped out. Not far from where he was standing now there had been a large farm where people from the village had gathered because they thought it was safe there. And then the water came cascading towards them from the mountains. The farmer threw himself to his knees, prayed to God, cried out to God that he would offer all manner of things if only God would spare them. In the instant he spoke the words, the water split into two streams, one on either side of the house. Everybody survived. Impossible to know if the story was true.
A barking sliced through the silence.
Oh! What was that? said Inger-Marie, body tensed.
Some dogs that are shut in, he said. I'll try and get them out so they can run off into the mountains.
Will they be okay there, though? she said.
Dogs are actually wild animals, he said. Once they were wolves. They'll be just fine.
She looked at him for a long time without saying anything.
Tell me when you've set them free then, she said.

He'd almost managed to forget the dogs when they heard their commotion. Of course they couldn't help the fact that their owner was an asshole. He wondered if he should take his rifle with him and finish them off, if he should take a trip over there tomorrow morning early, before Inger-Marie woke up. It should be possible to get there if he went through the forest.
They walked further along the road that led up to Olafsen's place, taking care where trees had fallen across the gravel road.
A dog, can you see that fat dog lying there? she said.
Oh dear, said Tor.

The old fellow must have been lying there in the rain for days, its yellow coat dark with moisture. It was old Olafsen's labrador; he found it odd that he hadn't noticed it when he'd walked this way before.
Oh, but it's Laffen, she said. Is he dead? And then she began to cry, her tears mingling with the rain that was falling on them.
I'm afraid he is, he said. He didn't know what else to say.

Inger-Marie didn't say anything else about the dogs, but he could tell by looking at her as she walked along beside him – walked along jiggling her head, just like a little old lady, walked along nodding her chin, way off in her own world – he could see that was what she was thinking about.
They had to leave, the two of them, they couldn't stay here much longer. Once it'd dried up a bit more they'd have to try and leave; it should be possible to follow the sheep track up along past Flata and Dalatjønna and onwards, down to the next village. It might well turn out they were better off there as the place lay higher above the course of the creek. The people in Flata were hippies who kept goats and sheep, sold knitted garments and vegetables – God knows how they managed to grow anything that high up. He doubted they'd left. They'd be able to get help from them, help to travel onward.
Wait here, he said when they came to Olafsen's house.
What'll you do? she whispered. He ran his hand over the top of the doorframe, and there was the key.
Just wait here, he said.
He went to the pantry inside the kitchen and even though he knew he was alone, that there was nobody here, still he expected somebody to be standing there ready to catch him, to place a claw on his neck, strike him down. He took some bottles of liquor that were standing there and packed them into a rucksack he'd found. On the stove stood the black pot, in front of the fireplace stood Olafsen's armchair, ugly as sin, beside the dog's basket.
What food he could find he put in the rucksack. There wasn't much. The fridge gave off a heavy, sweet odour.
When he came out, he saw Inger-Marie's head further down the road. She was holding onto a branch, jumping over a crack in the ruined road. His heart

leapt in him – there could be a landslide at any moment. He called out to her but she took to her heels, running heavy-footed in her big boots.
Damn her, he thought and the frame on the rucksack smacked the small of his back painfully with every step. Damn. It was as if Olafsen himself were hanging on his back. He barely caught a glimpse of the little rain jacket as it disappeared around the bend and when he got there, taking the last few metres cautiously because the road didn't look so good, he found her standing bent over a dirty puddle, poking around in it with a stick. As if nothing was wrong, as if it was a quite ordinary day.
Get up, he said. He said it again, his voice tense and quiet.
She slid her long, thin fingers the length of the dirty stick. Her hair dangled down, wet at the tips, and he said she'd better come up and she shook her head and he bent down and tugged hard at her jacket but lost his grip, and then she fell over, and she must have hit her leg on something because she wept painfully, red and wet in the face.
The greyish haze hung low in the sky and he let her walk along, tears filling her eyes and running down those pale cheeks of hers. They walked between the ravaged green hillsides, and he opened the bottle he'd put inside his jacket and took a long swig, and then another. Olafsen had never been any good at making liquor. It tasted appalling and he retched and drank until his body softened and his arms tingled, and Inger-Marie was far away from him as she walked ahead, and so were the howls of the dogs.

When he went up late in the evening to check that she'd gone to bed she was already asleep. He saw blood on her knee. She'd fastened a strip of cloth around it, and a streak of blood had trickled down onto the sheet.
He closed the door carefully behind him so as not to wake her and stumped down the steep stairs in his wooden clogs. And as always when he wasn't paying attention, he fucked up: he slipped and fell, striking every step on the way down with his heels, and ended up sitting at the bottom, ears ringing with the sound of his heels against the staircase. It felt as if his body had been set on fire. He screamed out loud. His elbow had knocked out part of the bannister along the way and it was bleeding. He sat down at the table, took out the bottle of liquor and drank some of it. He sat there and ate tuna and

crisp-bread. The tinned mackerel he shoved aside; he'd saved that for Inger-Marie. To stay here was to give in to madness: rotten water, dead dogs, a child he couldn't figure out. He couldn't find any way of keeping her here, in this world, the only one they had. She constantly vanished into her own. The tears streamed from his eyes and fell into his food.

*

The next day, it stopped raining. It happened so abruptly. The evening before, it had bucketed down, towards morning he'd been woken by a ticking on the roof. Then it went quiet.

He got dressed and left the house, closing the door gently behind him, stopped on the steps to take a piss before walking along the edge of the forest, up towards the farm where the sounds were coming from. His rifle was slung over his shoulder. The girl was still lying there asleep, wouldn't wake for some hours. Her thin white hair was tangled on her neck, her thumb was in her mouth and she'd thrown off her duvet in her sleep, lay there on her stomach, her legs brown and long, the home-made bandage around her knee. He didn't know what to do with her, he wished Monica was here to tell him what to do, how to handle eight-year-old girls. He couldn't do it.

The water had risen overnight and he couldn't understand it now that the rain had stopped. It robbed him of all his strength. In the beginning, you could blame all the melting snow, the frost in the earth, but now he couldn't understand where all the water was coming from any more. He didn't understand it. They had to leave, they should have gone long ago and now he didn't have a clue where they should go, how they would get away from here.

When he was younger, he'd lived a year in Oslo, working on a building site, living in a barracks with his brother. Most of his co-workers were from out of town and he mostly kept company with the others from the valley. Or with himself – preferably that. At weekends they'd travel home in packed cars and the weekends when the others stayed to party, he'd go back home on his own. The others laughed at him, wanted him to join them. His brother called him a bumpkin. He didn't care, Oslo didn't suit him, he couldn't understand how people could live their lives there, walk around breathing in exhaust

fumes the whole day long, live their life in a machine. That was how it felt, like a big machine that sucked people into it and turned them into machines too. No freedom in the city: he needed different air, space.
Every night, he lay down in his bunk and slept, waiting for the next day, waiting for Friday when he could go home. When Monica fell pregnant, he stopped commuting. She laughed at him, said they needed the money, that she could manage by herself during the week if that's what he was worried about. He lay pressed against her, that great, taut belly of hers, felt the kid kick, thought that he would never leave them, that he would stay here from now on. He thought he could do everything, carry everything on his shoulders: Monica, him and the little one. There were no ugly shadows, nothing that could stop him. He packed in commuting and got a job at the garage that belonged to the petrol station. He stopped drinking, more or less.

He trod carefully, keeping to one side of the gravel road before striking out through the trees. The earth smelt rotten and several times his boots stuck fast. He clambered over uprooted trees. Everything looked different, impossible to recognise. A glen opened out before him, a patch of grass untouched by the devastation. A light shone down from the sky through a white haze. There were no insects to be seen, no birds, just a quiet drip of raindrops falling from the branches.
As he approached Sætre's farm he stopped dead several times and listened. A slew of boulders lay piled against several of the buildings. He stepped across the farmyard, feeling as if a thousand eyes were following him, every step he took.
He turned his face to the sky, where the thin haze was receding. Along the mountainside some way off, spruce trees lay uprooted on top of large stones. The mayor used to live a little way above where he now stood; the big house was crushed, he and his wife both vanished in the landslide and all that could be seen in the dark, wet earth was part of the foundation wall and a heap of planks, with a birch, green leaves on its branches, lying on top.
It was absolutely still; all he could hear was his own heart, his own breath. He went to the porch and placed his hands like a funnel around his eyes, peering

into the window beside the door. It was coated in congealed mud, and earth and stones had staved in the wall.
He stopped and stood quietly for a moment, wondering whether Inger-Marie was still sleeping or whether she was awake. And if she was awake, what was she doing now? Finding herself some food? Would she go out now it wasn't raining? He was her father, he was supposed to take care of her. It was just the two of them. If they couldn't be good to each other, there was nothing.
Something slammed against the door in front of him and he jumped back, reached for his rifle, drew it and aimed. He was looking straight into the red jaws of a dog, an emaciated dog, wild eyed. It was Sætre's bird dog, one of them, thinner than ever, its face twisted and distorted by the opaque windowpane.
His heart raced in him like a madman and the hand he'd laid on the door shook. He kept his foot pressed against the door and placed his weight against it for safety's sake but the door was locked. He waited a bit, waited for somebody to say his name, for somebody to "catch" him standing there, but it didn't happen, just the wild barking of the trapped dog. One; where was the other one? Was it dead? Then he hauled himself up onto the railing and clambered up the vertical fire escape that led up to the old part of the house; it gave a nasty creak and he was filled with dread, because somewhere inside he knew what awaited him – that there was somebody or something there, that it wasn't empty; he knew Sætre wouldn't have left his animals, knew it for a fact.
An odd, cloying smell seeped out from the little landing. He was prepared for the worst when he leaned towards the window and looked in, but even so he jumped at the sight. On the floor, a little way in front of the window, face turned towards him, a woman lay against the floor; she lay on her side, as if she'd just laid down for a rest. But her body was still in that way only dead bodies are, her skin pale and stiff, her eyes were closed, her jaw hung down and she gaped blackly into space. His eyes filled with tears, the smell penetrated to where he was standing; she must have been dead a while.
Help me, he heard.
It was dark further inside the room, he couldn't see a thing; he struck the butt of the rifle against the glass several times until it shattered, settling on the

floor in big shards. He worked his hand in and lifted the catch, then he climbed in and stood on the floor at Sætre's place, a man he hadn't exchanged a word with since the court case about the little stretch of road. There at the end of the room he lay. His white hair lay flat against his skull, only his upper body stuck out from beneath the beams and bricks. The floor was dark with water, which had run in through the big crack in the ceiling. It was as if somebody had bled all the colour out of the old fellow.
A little draught caused the lace curtains on either side to shift slightly before settling heavily against the window again.
A sobbing and whistling came from the Sætre bloke, or what was left of him. His body shook violently and the voice that reached Tor belonged to a man who hadn't spoken for a long time.
Tor said nothing. He went closer, stepped past the body on the floor. The woman looked small, her face collapsed, her belly big beneath her dress.
For a long time he stood looking at those two bodies, one dead, one just barely alive. Who had he thought would come? Not Tor at any rate, that was plain to see.
After a while, Sætre calmed down, stopped that whistling, although his body shuddered and shifted of its own accord.
Tor had avoided him, leaving the café if he saw him sitting there, refusing to go into the petrol station if he heard his voice from inside the garage. He'd be relieved the day he died and he was free, he'd often thought that. If only he'd disappear from the world, he'd thought, he who had so much, who could be so miserly and who had to take Tor, take him down, right at that time when everything else was falling apart and Monica was at her sickest. He'd never get over that, he'd never earn enough to recover from the court case.
What the hell are you doing here, said Sætre in that new, hoarse voice of his.
I can leave again, if that's what you want, said Tor. His jaws felt stiff.
Sætre shook his head weakly. You won't do that, he said.
The fact that he hadn't left shouldn't have come as a surprise to Tor considering how mean the bloke was. His comb-over lay flat on one side. In the feeble light from the window, the crown of his head was clearly visible. He pictured Inger-Marie's little head, pictured holding it in the palm of his hand; only that picture, of him walking round lulling her to sleep, was interrupted by

another: Inger-Marie sitting at the table without looking up, barely moving her head, that tiny quivering, barely visible; he didn't want to think about her now. Tor bent down and studied the situation. Even through the stink of the corpse, he could smell the odour of shit, piss and shit, old people's shit, there was nothing worse than that. It was clear to see that he was in pain.

Come on, said Sætre. I've been lying here I don't know how long. Thought we'd be safe, but then Magna fell over and couldn't get up, and then the whole mountain came tumbling down, right into the house.

He nodded towards the beam that had fallen on his legs. Several of the timbers from the wall between the rooms had tumbled out, it was probably only a matter of time before the whole place collapsed.

Can you lift this up, he asked, his mouth quivering; their eyes met, the green pair blinked at him and in one of the eyes, the right one, the pupil had been drawn down into a teardrop shape, so it looked as if the black was bleeding into the iris, and that part of the iris, he saw, was yellowish. The light outside shone across the floor and the old timber walls. It had cleared up, he caught a glimpse of the sun behind the thick veil of fog overarching the valley, and he had an impression, a distinct impression that he'd been lured into a trap, a thousand eyes upon him. He wanted to go but didn't; instead, he crouched down and looked at the beam, as if it was a car wreck, jacked up and ready for assessment. One of Sætre's legs was covered by the beam up to the hip – whether it was crushed or not was difficult to see, but it was giving off a smell of rot.

The floor yielded a bit beneath him, just slightly. He wouldn't be able to lift the beam. He straightened up and stood thinking it over. If he managed to work him out from underneath the timber, what then? Nobody could help them and there was no way out.

Tor held his breath. There was nothing he wanted more than for the other man to die, but not right now, with him as a witness. Sætre looked confused, grimacing so that he saw the whole of the inside of his mouth – dark red with sores, his tongue a dry ball rolling around.

What d'you think? he said.

He said they'd have to see, stood straddling the beam and took hold of it with both hands, gauged its weight a bit. Then he pulled, carefully at first – his

back wasn't so good – but that didn't work, so he put more effort into it. The beam didn't stir. He wiped his hands dry on his trousers, bent down and pulled at the beam once again. It felt as if the muscles in his arms would burst. The beam stirred slightly, a few millimetres. Sætre moaned beneath him. Tor swallowed hard so as not to retch.

Now listen here, said Sætre. There's a radio transmitter in the next room. He nodded towards the room beyond the collapsed wall.

You're a mechanic, you'll get it working.

Tor shook his head slowly. So he thought he was stupid enough to go in there, a room with collapsed supporting beams and a brick wall scattered across the floor. He took a few steps backwards, towards the open window.

My family can help us. Not just me, he said, but you lot too, you and your daughter.

He said nothing, drew back his arm.

The pair of you are going to die here.

The words from that toothless mouth made him take another step towards the window. Then the Sætre bloke started going on about money – he'd could get hold of some money, he could get somebody to come and fetch the lot of them and transport them to one of the evacuation centres. He thought he could buy him, that Tor was for sale; that first he could break him and then he could wave his wads of banknotes under his nose, as if he was a kid.

He lay there making noises and Tor could no longer hear what he was saying, he was nagging away so much that his head was filling up, it droned and raged in there, there wasn't room for anything else, the floor beneath him swayed, not a sound could be heard of the dogs any more. He held his breath, watched the mouth moving in that old face, tried to think clearly.

If he got the radio working and he could trust what he said, they could start over in another place. He hadn't even dared think about that. Work would be easy to come by – they'd certainly need people like him nowadays, more than ever before. He'd thought he couldn't do it, couldn't leave this place, and then it turned out that he wasn't alone. This wretched creature before him lay there in his own shit and was going nowhere. His wife lay on the floor, and was dead. Something released him from its grip and went on its way and he felt like shrieking with laughter. It was as if they didn't exist. As if there wasn't any

flood, as if everything was a hallucination. I'm nobody, he thought, there's nobody here. It liberated him in a way; it was as if they didn't exist any longer, neither him nor his daughter, as if nothing meant anything.
Got any liquor in the house? he asked.
The man nodded towards the hallway. Room on the left, first cupboard, reach in behind the sheets – there's a few bottles there.
He looked tired.
Tor got up and went into a room that looked almost unharmed, drawing in a deep breath. Only a few patches up in the corner of the ceiling bore witness to the damp that was seeping in everywhere. He stuck his hand in through the cool, white sheet and in a flash, a glimpse rose up from when he was little, so vague he could barely grasp it, something from a fold in his brain that hadn't been opened up since that time, and that slipped through his fingers before he'd understood a thing about it. He placed his hands around a heavy bottle and drew it out. It was a pale, expensive cognac. He sat down on the floor and drank himself dizzy. He pulled out the sheets so they ended up in a tangle on the floor, but didn't find any more bottles. Just as systematically, he went through the other cupboards and drawers, and in the cupboard by the door, on a shelf above the ironing board and laundry things, there were two small bottles of liquor. He chuckled a bit, stuffed them in his pockets and kept a firm hold on the bottle of cognac.
When he got up and came out into the hallway, he heard nothing from the room beside it. Perhaps he was dead. The cloying air had crept up on him again. There was the door into the ruined room; he opened it and looked in. One of the walls had tumbled down into the room where those two lay and the floor sloped nastily in that direction. It might hold firm but safe it was not. Now his head began to throb again, he felt the pressure against his forehead and down towards his jaw. It was like having toothache. He lay down on the floor, lay there and stared up at the white-painted ceiling. It was a long time since he'd heard the dog. It'd probably given up.
He lay there a while, then got up. He was quite calm when he went over to Sætre. His face was white and his skin taut, a film of sweat lay over his nose and cheeks.
I couldn't see any radio transmitter, he said.

His eyes were closed, a wheezing sound from his chest was the only noise in the room. Then Sætre opened his eyes and groaned feebly.
It's in the far left corner. You have to go in there to see it.
All the while, he looked at the bottle he was holding. He held it out to him, he grasped it with both hands and took a swig, blinked quickly, drank a few more swigs and seemed to be able to take it. Then he started telling him about Magna, who'd thought this would pass, so they stayed on. Then her glucose levels fell and sugar didn't help and he didn't know what to do, and then she died and he sat in the chair and talked to her. He thought somebody would come for them, but nobody came and so here we were, he said, and one night the big birch snapped, the roof fell in. Just my luck, he said.
Just his luck it wasn't, though, because Sætre was born with a silver spoon in his mouth and everybody knew that – but how far luck was good or bad, well, that depended on how you dealt with what life handed out.
Tor weighed one thing up against another. If he got the transmitter working and managed to alert the Sætre bloke's kids, there was still no guarantee they'd be able to get help to him and his daughter. He couldn't manage to get things in perspective, collect his thoughts properly. If this, then that. No matter what he did, it wouldn't lead to anything good. He was condemned because he'd come here, condemned because he lived in the same neighbourhood as Sætre, because their two families had lived alongside each other and quarrelled with each other for generations. Condemned from the start, no matter what he did. The headache pressed against his temples.
I lay there looking at Magna and thinking every evening that this was the last day. But then I don't die. I can't seem to die, said the Sætre bloke.
Tor looked around him. He felt restless, had to get home.
Wait here, I'll go take a look at the radio transmitter, he said.
Sætre fixed his eyes on him.
You can't leave me here – surely you can't be that despicable?.
Tor pressed his lips together, said nothing, backed past the dead body and towards the dark window.
What are you scheming – to take everything I own? he called after him. Tor almost felt sorry for the old boy. He hadn't actually been thinking of taking anything, but of course he should take whatever food and drink he could find

with him since he was here – in times like these it was the only sensible thing to do. They probably had cans of diesel in the garage too. He rapped on the main door with his rifle, but saw no sign of the dog.
As he walked along the road, he heard no sound from man or beast.

The sun bobbed white on the horizon, the mist sat in a thin layer down on the fields. The light sliced his eyes, he had to get home, he'd been gone far too long. He walked along the edge of the forest, the same way he'd walked over here. The grove that'd been bathed in such a strange sheen earlier in the day was just a grove. He couldn't shake off Sætre words, that he was despicable. A despicable man, was that what he was? The day his brother had come to his door, it wasn't to tell him about the misery he'd seen around him in the past few days, but to frighten him into leaving, to tell him he was a bad and despicable man, a coward.
Of course he should've sent Inger-Marie away. Of course he should've. But he hadn't known it'd get this bad, he really hadn't known that.
As he walked along it felt as if acid was burning its way through his stomach lining. What if they sent somebody for Sætre. It could happen and if it happened, he wouldn't hold back, he'd tell them the worst things about him. For all he knew, he'd get the blame for Mrs Sætre's death too. It might well be that the old curmudgeon would make it through another night, stubborn as he was. And if so, wouldn't he tell them about the man who simply left, tell them about him and his daughter, where they could be found, what kind of people they were? He pulled out the cognac, took a drink, then jumped over a puddle and walked slowly onwards. No dogs barking, just the drone of the river and the babble of the new creeks that had burrowed their way onward through the soft soil. The surrounding hillsides were dark, green, full of secrets. From the highest point of the road, he stood looking down at the white house. It was tall and pointed, and he understood now that the ridge of the roof should have been turned the other way, then it would've been better protected against wind and storm. If he got some money back on the insurance, he could turn the roof around, he and his brother could do it together maybe.

He stood there a while, drew his hand over his face, dried the sweat, then went over to the garage, putting down the rifle and picking up a crowbar. It was absolutely silent around him. He stood there, legs wide, head slightly tilted and thought. Then he turned around and walked back to the Sætre farm, walking along the little stretch of road that no longer belonged to him and wasn't much of a road now anyway. Slender willow trees had begun to grow on either side of it and one side had crumbled away.
He went cautiously as he approached the main building, as he climbed up the ladder to the second floor. Suddenly, one of his hands lost its grip and he nearly dropped the crowbar, there was a clang of metal on metal and he swore to himself.
The room was filled with a warm yellow light as he stepped into it. He saw the dust motes dance. He stepped cautiously across the floor, keeping close to the wall, as far away as possible from the dead body. Sætre was lying so still over there he began to wonder if he'd died. Several big Persian rugs covered much of the floor, he hadn't thought about that the last time he was here; he trod carefully until he came to the spot where he lay and as he came right up close, he thought he saw a glint in his eyes.
You came back, he said and closed his eyes, and Tor did the same as he swung the crowbar at his skull.

The air was still, he was cold and shivery, dizzy with hunger. It was hard to understand how it could've happened but he'd gone astray somewhere in the forest. The landscape was so altered and he wasn't quite himself – confused, his body cold. For a while, he'd walked around without understanding where he was, not recognising the place, it was like being a kid again, with all the perplexity of those years, the soft part of his life. He stopped at a spot where he found some water, bent down and washed his hands and face in a stream, washed blood off with cold water. It had congealed and was difficult to get off, streaks of it were left behind, red around the nails, a smell of iron. Finally, he washed his face and boots, then went home for a second time.

He walked in and went straight upstairs, afraid that Inger-Marie might be gone, that something might have happened to her. It was half dark in there,

he didn’t see her at once, almost didn’t notice her sitting there in her bed. She was so still. It didn’t look as if she’d been out of bed since he’d set off several hours before. She looked in his direction with big eyes, then began to nod her head, almost imperceptibly, without saying a thing. He went over and sat down on the edge of her bed, took her hands in his. She let him do it.
It wasn’t fair on you for us to stay, for us not to leave, he said, and now he began to weep, he hadn’t planned it that way, but when the weeping came there was a lot of it, it eddied up through his body and found its way through his throat. He sobbed and howled and laid his head in her lap. The tears ran, the snot ran from him, he lay there for a long time, hearing nothing but his own breath. Then he sat up again.
I’ll find a way out, he said, we’ll find a way and find the others, I promise you, Inger-Marie. He hugged her to him.
That’s good, Daddy, said Inger-Marie. But I’m wondering about the dogs. Did you find them, she said. Did you get them out?

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