

Winter War

by Janne S. Drangsholt

Chapter 1

What did Tolstoy mean when he wrote that all happy families are alike, but that each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way? Lately I've been thinking that maybe he just wanted to emphasise how little there is to say about the families who eat their five a day and spend their winters in the mountains and summers in some seaside cottage together with a mangled ensemble of grandparents, in-laws, cousins, aunts and uncles. How little there is to tap from people who actually manage to spend an entire day in a hammock, without even once falling upon the thorns of life.

Who knows what they do to pass the time? Who cares?

The unhappy families, on the other hand – the ones who can rarely agree on whether or not they should even go to the mountains; the ones who start worrying about the summer vacation in January; the ones who can never gather for a family reunion because they're worried that someone might actually say what they think – these families can easily generate a story or two.

One such story opens with a two-day seminar in publication- and dissemination- strategies with additional introduction to an a new digital tool called Vortex, which took place in a hotel on Moster Island in August, just before the beginning of the autumn semester.

I didn't want to go. Obviously. But we had been told that this seminar was obligatory, since one of the reasons for organising it in the first place was to find ways to avoid the cutbacks that would assuredly hit the Department when the new government was in place. As a result of said threat we all got on the same bus one early Monday morning. Some (Ingvill) had dressed up to such an extent that one might suspect she was secretly planning a romantic trip to St. Petersburg, while others (the Scandinavian philologists) behaved as though they were setting out for a friends weekend. Again others (me) went into full panic mode from the moment the bus driver closed the door.

– Well, Ingrid, the chair smiled as she glided into the seat next to me, – we're finally on our way. I was hoping we could manage a trip abroad, but we'll just have to save that one for another year. It's exciting to go abroad, don't you find?

– Yes, I lied, – going abroad is extremely exciting.

– But it's also exciting to go to Moster Island, she continued, – especially since they've refurbished the place into a spa hotel. And tonight we'll enjoy a three course meal with wine package. That should boost morale quite a bit, don't you think?

- Three courses with wine package, I repeated in a mechanical manner while putting on my soundproof earphones in spite of the fact that one out of five key words for the trip was "socialisation". After all, self-preservation inevitably triumphs socialisation.

I had stayed in this hotel a couple of times before, and as far as I could tell no major changes had been made since my last visit. The reception desk had a sheet of paper with the word "SPA" and an arrow pointing into a darkened hallway, but other than that everything seemed pretty much the same. As always the seminar was held in the conference room "Seaspray", as always there was a table laden with coffee, tea and a fruit plate containing an overweight of kiwi, and, as always everyone seemed inordinately happy to be here.

Philologists in Scandinavian Studies, History, English and Theology proceeded to partake in the coffee and kiwi, gathering in small groups that soon made the room buzz with excited small-talk. This only came to a halt when the chair cleared her throat from her assigned spot by the blackboard.

- Welcome to Moster Island, she beamed, - where we'll spend the next couple of days in an atmosphere of positivity and learning, delving into such exciting topics as publication, external funding, dissemination, internationalisation and, not least, interdisciplinary strategies.

Peter raised his hand.

- Yes, the chair smiled encouragingly.

- We are also to receive an introduction to the digital tool Vortex, are we not? he asked with a frown.

- That has unfortunately been cancelled, due to illness, she replied with a slight frown.

This news immediately led to intense mumbling among several colleagues, and the mood dropped palpably.

- This is a disaster, Peter exclaimed, - will it be rescheduled?

I glared at him in disbelief. If anything, this was good news. Vortex was the last item on the agenda, and a cancellation could easily lead to us leaving two hours before schedule.

- Absolutely, the chair nodded, holding up her hands in a kind of Vortex-guarantee, - Vortex will be rescheduled.

- All right, Peter sighed, - because it's really quite essential that we learn to master this.

I wondered whether I should raise my own hand and ask why it was so terribly important to receive training in a digital tool that nobody was ever going to use, but the chair cunningly used the ensuing pause to change the topic, so I just shifted in my chair. My back hurt when I sat with crossed legs for too long at a time. This was probably the price that had to

be paid for sitting like a woman for more than forty years. I tried to manspread as frequently as I could in order to rectify the situation, even though this meant that I sometimes came knee-to-knee with the one sitting next to me. In this particular instance, that was Peter, who as usual was taking up as much room as he possibly could.

- And with this, the chair announced joyously, - I present to you Professor in Entrepreneurship and Innovation from University of Bergen, Tone Iversen.

Everyone clapped their hands for a curly woman encased in several layers of velor. She was breathing heavily, and I thought to myself that she should probably have chosen cotton instead. At the same time I observed that Tone Iversen appeared to be one of those people who are perfectly contented with whatever they bring into a room, which in this case turned out to include a laser pen.

- Lovely to be here, she smiled self-assuredly, - and I suspect that we will spend some useful and instructive days together on Moster Island. Usually I tend to start these events by sharing some information about myself. For many years I worked for KILPIS, but at one point got tired of *that*, as I'm sure you understand (laughter from the audience) and started working as a researcher for AMROS. For obvious reasons I also quit that job after a while (more laughter) and worked for a couple of years as a special consultant in the private sector, until I was offered a full-time professorate at UiB. And *ipso facto* I wound up here with you people!

Everyone applauded, cheered and laughed intensely, as though Tone Iversen's presentation had been today's high point. I wondered where all this enthusiasm came from. Did other people hoard and store optimism and positivity in a way that I for some reason could not?

This was one of life's big mysteries, and it was not going to be answered by Tone Iversen. Her speciality seemed to lie in pacing around the room and pointing a people with her laser pen.

- You need to ask yourself, she said, making holes in the air with the pen, - what have *you* done for your discipline? How have *you* paved the way? How can *you* pitch yourself, yes?

People nodded their heads thoughtfully and made notes.

- Because, Tone Iversen warned, - you don't have an enormous amount of time to pitch yourselves. How long do you think you have before the other person loses interest? You?

She pointed the laser pen at Ingvill, causing her face to go completely blank. Her response, when it finally came, was a long "eeeeeeeh".

- Aaand ... you lost me, Tone Iversen exclaimed triumphantly, - do you see what I did there? You have an average of eight seconds at your disposal before the other person zones out.

Eight, people! And to put it in perspective: an elevator ride in Oslo lasts for around twenty-four seconds.

She nodded meaningfully and let her gaze rest a moment on every person in the room, before moving on.

- I want us to work in pairs, she declared, - so turn to the person on your left and pitch your research. Put it in perspective and present the project that you're working on at the moment. Your partner will time you and let you know when the eight seconds are up. Are you with me?

I sighed and turned towards Peter, who smiled excitedly.

- All right, Ingrid, he said, - are you ready?

- No, I replied.

- Go, he instructed.

- Fine, I said, - I have written a PhD-thesis on *tehom*, which is a chaotic unity that we encounter in certain metaphorical representations in poetry, and I am now working on ...

- Time's up, Peter interrupted, - you lose.

- ... representations of identity in British post-war poetry, I continued, - from Ted Hughes to Alice Oswald, with a particular emphasis on how the subject is fundamentally divided and fragmented and, ultimately, has its roots in the chaotic *tehom* itself.

- Too long, Peter concluded, with a peculiarly pleased tone in his voice, - way too long, my dear.

He proceeded to pitch his own research in a perfect eight seconds, which made me suspect that he was cheating in some way. I was about to confront him when the lecturer spoke up once again.

- This, she declared, - is what we are going to work on for the next two days. Our goal is that everyone should leave the Island with an elevator-speech that should be comprehensible to whoever. Your supervisor, peers, neighbours, your local postal worker - it doesn't matter. The pitch is supposed to reach an addressee, regardless of background, ethnicity, gender, age, and so on. Are you with me?

Most people nodded, some kept taking notes, while others had turned to their phones.

- Perfect, Tone Iversen beamed, - in the meantime, I've got some "homework" for you. This afternoon I want everyone to stand in front of a mirror and rehearse their opening line. That's important, too, you see - to be able to kick your speech off with something that captures the other person's interest. It needs to be something edgy. Something dynamic. Something you're comfortable with. Think of Robert de Niro in *Taxi Driver*. He practices a lot on his "you

talking to me?"-line. He wants it to be perfect, right? This is what we're aiming for. Are you with me?

- We're with you, the Scandinavianists shouted. Some of them even applauded.

I raised my hand.

- Isn't this example slightly problematic, I asked, - if you consider the context of *Taxi Driver*? I mean, Robert de Niro has just returned from Vietnam, to a society and a culture that he doesn't recognise and certainly does not feel at home in. He's disillusioned, angry and scared by what he sees as moral degeneration. The result is meaningless violence - he ends up killing a lot of people.

Tone laughed so hard that her velor dress made waves, and several others joined her, smiling, chortling and shaking their heads in disbelief.

But I didn't give in.

- My point, I continued, - is that "you talking to me?" is one of the most misunderstood lines in movie history, and that we should probably choose something else as an inspirational quote?

- Well, Tone Iversen grinned, - I haven't seen *Taxi Driver* myself, but I'm sure you all get what I mean. It's important to be hungry, for change or success or whatever. Just like Robert de Niro, right?

- Right, I mumbled, mostly to myself.

I sat on the hotel bed and considered dropping dinner, but realised that I was far too hungry. A pack of nuts and a beer would have helped, but, as always in Norwegian wilderness hotels, the minibar was empty.

Alva cried when I left. She stood there in her pyjamas, which was really Bjørnar's T-shirt, holding onto me with skinny arms. This resulted in me crying in the car, allowing the irrational fear that always accompanied me on travel to flow freely from the moment I left home. What if I this was the time when I ended up in another dimension, where I was not married to Bjørnar and had three daughters, but lived in a basement with five cats that I was allergic to? Or what if the displacement awoke me from a deep sleep in the underworld, where I was doomed to an eternal existence in isolation as punishment for being a selfish and negative human being who was constantly complaining about others and never did a single good thing for anyone?

What if the narrative that was my life was just one big lie?

My mobile vibrated.

Dad says I have to drop tennis, Jenny wrote, because we're too busy, but you promised that he would take me! Can you please call him and explain?

It vibrated again.

I can't find my soccer uniform, Ebba wrote, HELP!

Bits of existential anxiety were immediately transformed into domestic guilt for sitting in a hotel room rather than pulling my weight at home. I called Bjørnar.

- Did you promise Jenny that I would drive her to her tennis lesson, he asked with his lawyer voice before I had a chance to say "hello".

- I said "maybe", I lied, - but just because today obligatory for everyone who is to take part in the upcoming tournament. So I thought you'd might ...

- Might what? he interrupted. - Today is the worst day for me to leave work early. I am so incredibly busy. Also I have to shop for groceries and make dinner before Ebba and I take off for soccer practise, and when I get back from that I'll have to work until I go to bed. There isn't even five minutes to spare in this schedule. And I can't leave Alva home alone.

It felt like I was short of breath. Monday was unquestionably the busiest day of the week. Ebba and Bjørnar had soccer, Jenny had drumming tutorials and tennis, and Alva had drama and swimming lessons. Usually my responsibility was Jenny and Alva, while Bjørnar took care of soccer and dinner, but even then it was almost impossible to check all the boxes. I sometimes found myself thinking that we should have been one extra adult in the family. Or possibly even a village.

That's why I couldn't fully explain why I had said yes to Jenny when she wanted me to guarantee that she would be able to attend her tennis lesson this week, when I knew that the correct answer was a clear no. There was just something about those big eyes and the stressed look that made it impossible to refuse her.

Besides, it still might be OK. At least if I could get hold of a time turner or a DeLorean time travel machine. And an extra adult.

- Good thing that there are usually two of us, I started in a faux cheerful tone, but he wasn't listening.

- I don't understand why you absolutely had to leave, he said grumpily, - on a Monday. And you hadn't laid out any clothes for the kids, either. It was complete mayhem after you left this morning. Ebba couldn't find her PE gear, Jenny couldn't find her swimsuit, and Alva had to go to school in a pair of trousers that had milkstains on them.

I felt a sucking sensation in my stomach, which I immediately attributed to hunger. It was, after all, nothing abnormal in liking one kind of trousers better than others. Or in only being able to wear two specific pairs of trousers in the whole world, both of which were strictly speaking too small and had big holes on their knees.

- Couldn't she have worn for the other one? I asked.

- I couldn't find the other one, he replied irritably, - and you know what she's like. I barely got her to school as it was.

- The other one is probably in the laundry room, I mumbled, with the sucking feeling making itself more noticeable, - in the dryer.

- Well, we couldn't find it, Bjørnar concluded, - and I think that laying out clothes is the least you can do when you leave me alone with this mess.

- But I *had* to attend this seminar, I protested, - it is obligatory. It's not like I *want* to go to Moster Island with my colleagues. And you know how anxious I get when I'm away from you, because I ...

- Don't pull a Matrix-parallel on me, Bjørnar warned, - I find reality challenging enough. The point is that we can't really cope with one of us being away. We need everyone here. The whole crew. On the ship. Do you see what I mean?

The sucking feeling was slowly working itself towards my chest. I *had* considered avoiding this trip by pretending to be sick, but so many social gatherings had been cancelled because I/Bjørnar/the children had suddenly wound up with fever/diarrhea/migraine that I felt we needed to enforce a little break if these excuses were to attain some degree of credibility. Also, I thought

it slightly embarrassing that the rest of the world regarded us as a bunch of weaklings, when the truth was that we were hardly ever sick.

- OK, I offered, - next time I'll pretend to have come down with something.

- That's not really what I mean, Bjørnar muttered, - it's just that I don't understand why these seminar-things must always involve travel and spending the night. It makes everything very challenging.

- Exactly, I agreed, relieved that we could finally channel our anger to someone other than me, - almost none of the people I work with have children, so they don't understand this. Most of them aren't even married.

- At any rate, Bjørnar sighed, - it is intensely stressful to be a single parent.

I didn't know what to say, so I said "puff".

- Puff, Bjørnar repeated, - you're giving me "puff"?

- Well, what do you want me to say, I answered irritably, - and what is it that you want me to do? I am stuck here on this stupid island where I'm supposed to be being stupid Robert de Niro in the mirror. I am not exactly enjoying myself, let me tell you!

- Are you doing "are you talking to me?", Bjørnar asked, - the most misunderstood line in movie history?

- Exactly! I exclaimed and a small wave of happiness flowed over me.

- Your workplace is bonkers, Bjørnar said, - you do know that, right?

- I agree with you forty-seven percent, I answered.

We hung up without agreeing to hate a common enemy as much as I would have wanted, but I had only just pressed the red button before the image of Jenny popped up on my screen.

- Hello Jenny, I said.

- Mum, she cried, - dad doesn't understand anything! I *have* to be there for tennis, or I won't be allowed to attend the tournament. And you promised!

- I know, I answered, - but it's just not possible. Dad can't take you because he needs to prepare supper and coach soccer. And after that he even needs to work.

- Can't I ride my bike? Jenny shrieked with a voice bordering on hysteria.

- It almost fifteen miles to the sports club, I told her and tried to sound patient, - and we all know how bad your sense of place is. Remember that time when you got lost on your way to school?

- I was trying out a new route, she sobbed.

- I know, sweetheart, I said, - but what if we try this: I send a message to your coach and hear if we can maybe move your lesson to later in the week? I'm home on Wednesday, which means that there are many days left before the tournament.

- OK, she agreed tearfully, - OK.

- You must calm down, I instructed and thought about how stressed Bjørnar was going to be if he came home and found her in this state, - we'll fix this. Don't worry.

- Do you really think it will be all right? she asked and sounded so vulnerable and fragile that my heart furrowed into a prune.

- Yes, I reassured her, - of course it will be all right!

But how was I to know whether it would be all right or not?

In this equation there were so many different elements that could sink the boat. The only thing that was certain was that I looked nothing like Robert de Niro in the mirror. Nor did I look like an edgy pitcher who could sell themselves and their project in a course of an eight-second elevator ride. I merely looked like myself - a slightly annoyed woman with a peculiarly massive amount of grey hair in the front. And the grey hair did not gather in a cool stripe, like with Caitlin Moran or Susan Sontag. Rather, single renegade strands of hair spread out over the entire head, making me look a more like Charlotte Bartlett.

Poor Charlotte Bartlett who had never married and who didn't have anyone to help keep her more eccentric personality traits in check. At the same time, there was no denying that she also held a quite extraordinary freedom. None of these emotional ties that are so incredibly strong and that attach themselves to you forever.

Apparently, research shows that childless couples are happier than the ones who bear offspring. Statistically speaking. I didn't know if I believed this or not. Naturally the childless couples would claim to be happy, whilst no one who had children could truthfully maintain that the whole family project didn't from time to time seem most of all like a low budget horror movie. Especially in the toddler phase, when one would wear the same spitstained clothes for weeks, was constantly exposed to vermin and would from time to time would collapse hysterically over a bowl of instant cake mix.

I tried to laugh.

This thing with Alva was clearly just a phase. If you thought about it, it wasn't really even a problem.

Once again my phone vibrated, and I looked down to where it lay on the bed. "Mum", it said, above a photograph where she gazed into the camera with a confrontational stare. It was a

stare that involved hurly-burly and a battle lost and never won. And right now, I did not have the energy to deal with that.

I left it where it was.

Chapter 3

Coincidence decided to place me next to Peter during dinner, as well.

- You talking to me? he said and nudged me genially, - you talking to me?
- Hilarious, I said in a flat voice, - absolutely hilarious.
- People used to say I looked like de Niro, he informed me while sipping his Guinness,
- back in the day.

- Of course they did, I muttered, sampling my wine while glaring at the Scandinavian philologists, who were laughing at something the chair had said. Everyone knew that they were the most convivial section, which was why she chose to sit with them instead of the religious scholars, where she belonged in terms of academic background.

Of the latter category only three showed up, in spite of the email emphasising obligatory attendance. They were sitting at the end of the table, wearing white shirts and identical navy blue sweaters, and equipped with orange soft drinks. None of them spoke, none of them checked their phones. They just sat there, staring into the great wide open.

The English section was more or less rallied, but the main reason for this was less that hardly anyone spoke Norwegian well enough to communicate socially with the rest of the faculty members. One exception was Ingvill, who had walked straight over to the Scandinavianists, elbowing her way to a seat next to Kjetil, who taught contemporary literature and was generally regarded as an academic fun boy. After finalizing his divorce last year, he had been on sick leave for a while, but today he had been delivering literary zingers nonstop and seemed to be back in good form.

I was toeing the party line, which involved having to listen to a list of actors that Peter was under the impression that he looked like. It was a plentiful list that included the likes of Robert Mitchum, Gérard Depardieu and Brad Pitt, and I had to admit that Peter was generous enough not to leave out generations or nationalities in this acteur-look-alike-overview.

- It's quite draining, actually, he finally concluded, - to be cursed with such a striking appearance. People can't see beyond appearances. And academia is particularly prejudiced. I've had to work twice as hard as everyone else to get to where I am today.

I cleared my throat and was about to utter yet another "you don't say?" when the chair rapped on her wineglass.

- Well, ladies and gentlemen, she began with a grin wide enough to let us know that she was slightly tipsy, - the cat is out of the bag. The Scandinavists here (she flung out her arm) are

such an eager group that I could keep the secret no more (laughter and cheering from said Scandinavists), so I've decided to just go right ahead and make it official.

She took an artful pause to increase the level of expectation ever so slightly in an audience that was probably most of all craving dessert, more wine and the possibility of a late-night argument about interdisciplinary research.

- As you all know, she finally said, - this is a seminar in publication and dissemination strategies. The university has something to learn on both of these topics, especially in mediating our knowledge and insight to the public.

- Because of the impact factor system, I whispered to Peter, who laughed in that barking way that he employed when he wanted to signal political or other opposition to the system.

- Some of you, the chair remarked, - might blame this on the impact factor system, and that may well be, but at the same time we need to make a note of the new wind that is blowing over Norwegian universities.

- And ill wind that blows nobody any good, Peter giggled with drunken breath in my ear, and I regretted having opened up to sidebar conversations.

- At University of Stavanger, the chair continued, - we have taken this wind into account when planning for the future. How? Well, from this semester we will enter into cooperation with ... (Kjetil did a drum roll on the table) ... the Kapittel International Festival of Literature and Freedom of Speech! Yes, that's correct! We shall work in close collaboration with this renowned festival and hence become part of an arena which promotes freedom of speech and the right to voice one's opinion without fear of censorship or punishment!

She lifted her hands as if having declared world peace, something the Scandinavists took as a signal to take their acclaim up a notch. They cheered, stomped their feet, and Kjetil even stood up and shouted "cheers to Tora!". The rest of us engaged in polite applause, with the exception of the Theologians who were locked in the same meditative state that they arrived in. There was nothing to suggest that they had heard a word she said.

- What this entails, the chair beamed, raising her hands to secure silence, - we shall come back to at a later stage, but for now I can divulge that the theme for next year's festival is "reality". I'm sure rings a bell for most of you ...

- Knausgård, a Historian shouted from the back of the room.

- Hjorth, Kjetil yelled, - and Hjorth!

- SHAKESPEARE, Peter boomed.

I and a few others laughed and lifted our glasses, but most people just gave him confused looks.

- That's right, the chair smiled, - we're talking about the most significant topic of our times, nationally as well as internationally: Reality literature. The Scandinavists have already promised that they will put together a crash course on the subject, and I am counting on the English section to do the same. We will also participate actively as a department throughout the autumn and spring, either by sitting on boards, forming project groups, writing op-eds or contributing through other channels. To sum up, we will inaugurate this epoch-making, visionary and revolutionary project by the end of the month, and see it through to its fruition during the Festival next year. This autumn the academe and cultural workers will join forces to promote knowledge and formation, and we are extremely privileged to get seats on this train from the moment it leaves the station. So cheers, people - here's to reality!

We all raised our glasses and I told myself that I didn't care. But there were at least two problematic elements in this equation. For one thing, I was of the opinion that reality literature was the most meaningless and least interesting concept that the literary debate had ever produced. How could reality literature be conceived as "documentary representation" of an historical subject when an "I" was only an arbitrary expression for a fleeting, fragmented and fundamentally unutterable consciousness? What was an "I" when you thought about it? Even I didn't know who this "I" that was me was. Fairly obvious questions and observations like these made me wonder how someone could utter the phrase "reality literature" without blushing.

This was one problem.

Another was that for a while I had been working on a scholarly article that explained just how useless and moronic the concept of reality literature was. This article embellished quite extensively on how it debilitated literature as an intellectual process as well as the human individual as a spiritual being. To explain, I had incorporated examples ranging from Shakespeare to Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot and Sylvia Plath, and when it came to discussions of the latter the tone became so furious and embittered that I was at times frightened at my own commitment to the cause.

I lacked one or two articles to apply for a professorate, and this was supposed to be the flagship of my application. This was the publication one that was going to secure a room of my own. A room where I had time and space to think and write. Where I could secure strong and fixed boundaries against all that which fragmented, cracked and decrepitated thought-processes. Where no one pushed their way in or took up space.

That was where I longed to be.

And now this.

Let this eye be an eye, I thought, the shadow of this lip, an abyss.

I felt dizzy and was about to return to my room when I felt a hand on my knee. In order to make sure that I wasn't, in fact, hallucinating, I lowered my gaze and immediately received confirmation that not only was there a hand resting on my knee, but that it was Peter's.

I was so perplexed that at first I didn't even think to push it away, but just sat there, sensing that the hand squeezed my knee lightly, as if to check whether it was, indeed, alive.

- What is the plan with the hand? I asked.

- Harrharrharr, he chuckled, - what do you want the plan to be?

- What the Foucault, I exclaimed, - you're not actually trying to seduce me?

- Well ..., he began and stared at me with a drunken gaze that made him look like a village idiot.

- Have you lost all you marbles? I hissed.

- Ingrid, Ingrid, he smiled indolently and moved his hand slightly further north, - we've had some good times, you and I, in St. Petersburg and ...

- The days in St. Petersburg were the worst in my entire life, I cried and shoved his hand violently away, - I had to see a therapist for years after that trip!

- All right, all right, Peter uttered impatiently, - but you can't deny flirting during the seminar today.

I looked speechlessly at him and tried to ransack my brain to identify the moment when Peter thought that I had been flirting with him.

- When? I finally asked.

- When you rubbed you knee against mine, he said slowly, as if he were talking to someone with a slight cognitive malfunction, - *that* was flirting. You can't deny it.

He started to lightly caress my arm, and I almost threw up.

- NO, I declared and shook my head firmly, - that was not flirting. That was sitting with both feet planted on the floor and with legs wide apart. That was manspreading.

- What do you mean? Peter asked with a bewildered look on his face, - manspreading? What's that?

- *You're* manspreading, I muttered, - all the sodding time!

He got a peculiar look on his face and collapsed in his chair a bit.

- So it was not flirting? he repeated.

- Seriously, Peter, I sighed, - do you feel any sort of spark between us?

- Not at all, he announced and shook his head for emphasis.

- There you go, then, I concluded, - you might be Gérard Depardieu, but I am not Andie Macdowell.

- Who?

- It doesn't matter, I signed and patted his shoulder, - just don't do that again. You and I are colleagues bordering on friends, nothing more.

- I know, he conceded lamely, - I know.

- I'm off to bed, I said.

I stood up and left. By the door I turned around and looked at Peter. He was staring blankly in front of him in a manner that made him look like a Theologian. It was an empty gaze that promised nothing good for anyone.