From *The Deletion of Paul Abel*
(*Nullingen av Paul Abel*)
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Chapter 3

Up until the national work stoppage at 12.15 pm, Astrid had been taking part in what she regarded as a peculiar meeting with her new boss, David Henriksen Norddal, in his office on the second floor of the Courthouse. Norddal was fifteen years her senior, and in addition to competing at national level in heptathlon had something as unheard of as two children. He continually steered the conversation back to her past, as if this was supposed to prompt some special recognition on her part, or prepare her for another topic that might prove to be what he actually wanted to talk about. She was confused. The meeting was supposed to be about her job description, which hadn't yet been finalised, but Norddal talked mostly about sex and drugs. On the desk before him was a pyramid-shaped sign featuring the title 'Court Administrator', indicating that he was the Courthouse's most senior administrative manager. He was basically just a clerk who didn't have a clue about the law – Astrid had realised this during her job interview.

'Like you, I also once saw myself as a kind of rebel,' he said, glancing for the tenth time at the large, square clock that hung above the door. Its second hand gave a sigh every time it moved. 'But I grew up. I discovered that the struggle against *the traditional* is far more rebellious than the usual predictable, revolutionary twaddle. In our reality, *the establishment* is more radical. These days, being a reactionary requires infinite strength. In many ways, I envy the premodern individual. People must have been happier before they were given all kinds of explanations for things. I mean, jeez, that's how little of a reactionary *I* am.'

Astrid took a moment to think about what it would be like to work under a boss who could rattle off such empty sentiments. She was uncomfortable enough that he knew so much about her. From the moment she applied for the job he'd had access to her deepest socio-biometric profile, logged by the shell over many years and sent to the official registers. Her socio-biometry revealed everything about who she was, all she'd thought, all she'd done, all she wanted. Employers had the right to know such things – which was reasonable, in many

ways. How else were they to know who they were welcoming into their ranks? She might be a terrorist or a pervert. But what Norddal had found in her socio-biometry that was so special, and which he now seemed to be awkwardly hinting at, she had no idea. She had the unpleasant feeling that he'd sat down to replay all the times she'd ever been intimate with someone. What did she have to show for herself that front? Not much. Twelve partners, eleven of them men. She'd once engaged in what probably qualified as an orgy, in a bathhouse on the waterfront in Århus. Rumour would have it that such encounters are usually embarrassing and clumsy, but for Astrid it had been a whole-hearted success – although not something she felt the need to repeat. Was that really what he was hinting at? Other than this enjoyable one-off her excesses had been fumbling and unenterprising. She had tried a couple of the approved central nervous system stimulants that could be purchased through agreeable GPs, but their only effect was to make her mildly paranoid. Shortly after this she'd met Paul, and then the experiments were over – he wasn't the type to push boundaries. Did she miss it? Did she even need to consider whether or not she missed it, as long as she wasn't unhappy?

'So what do you think now – about the future, I mean? It'll be good to come here, to no longer have to slave away for big money in the private sector, won't it? Let bygones be bygones, isn't that what they say?'

Afraid she might disclose her lack of self-understanding, Astrid didn't dare ask Norddal what on earth he was getting at. Instead she nodded and pulled a face that was intended to look half ashamed, half secretive, but he kept on talking.

'Our true personality is most intensely expressed during our formative years. Everything we do later is simply an attempt to reunite ourselves with this core. All mental complaints stem from unsuccessful attempts to become who we were as a child. Sexual desires bordering on perversions are just one example; a propensity for drug use is another. My personal theory about criminals is that they're driven by an insatiable, childish longing to touch their own faeces – to come into contact with the dirty, with the waste products of life. Working hours are eight to four, but you may have to stream from home when necessary,' said Norddal.

Astrid wanted to point out that his attempts at psychoanalysis were not only inappropriate for an office manager but also beyond banal. With some effort, she managed to restrain herself.

'Overtime is no problem. I don't have many other obligations.'

'What about your husband – does he understand that your job is going to demand quite a lot from you?'

‘Paul is extremely understanding,’ Astrid confirmed.

‘I’m glad to hear it,’ said Norddal.

After a few deadly boring minutes during which they went through the rules regarding absences and HSE provisions, and in which Astrid became increasingly worried about her future (perhaps leaving the legal practice was a mistake?), a deep, familiar voice suddenly boomed within her.

Everyone is requested to meet in the cafeteria, immediately.

The transcranial shell was applied to her cerebral cortex. A layer of graphene just a single atom thick; a helmet on the inside of her skull, assembled piece by piece by microscopic robots injected through a millimetre-diameter hole in her cranium. It was the most advanced model available, years ahead of Paul’s old handheld wreck. He was the only person she knew of who still insisted on using one of the older models. The operation had cost her almost a million kroner and a week in an induced coma while the work was carried out. But at moments like this she thought it worth every krone and every second she had lost. The signal that now reached her was not a voice, but a being. An electrical presence. A measurable force.

She looked at her new boss. He leapt to his feet, eyes narrowed as if he was straining to hear some far-off sound.

‘Finally!’

‘The cafeteria? You too?’

‘Yes. Come on.’

He rounded the desk and walked towards the door; for the first time Astrid noticed that she was much taller than him, probably by as much as around fifteen centimetres. He cast a brief, disapproving glance up at her before his face returned to what she realised was his signature expression: the slightly roguish grimace of a man who has seen and heard it all, and who has taken on the dirty job of communicating all this to others.

‘What do you think it’s about?’ she asked.

They walked through the corridors side by side, Norddal half a head shorter – he compensated for this by pretending he was craning his neck to look for something outside.

‘New opportunities. If recent events are anything to go by, it’s bound to be something exciting,’ he said.

What were these ‘recent events’? Astrid tried to think back. Storms, so many that they had run out of both male and female names to give them – for the time they were using the cast of *War and Peace*. Some member of the Rostov family was expected to strike over north-

western Norway any day now. What else? A new and even more broad-spectrum model of the shell that could not only read and interpret brainwaves, but also store them and in time transfer all human experience to donor brains. A Norwegian actress who married the alarm system of the house in which she lived, which turned out to have a far more complex personality than her ex-husband. But none of these incidents had demanded that they leave their work. Unless a catastrophic storm was brewing, the storm to end all storms, a combination of unfortunate circumstances. She had the feeling that Norddal knew more than he was letting on, but on the other hand that was probably exactly the impression he wanted to give.

They took the lift down to the first floor where the cafeteria was located, the small cable-operated glass cage clattering against its moorings. Norddal gazed at her, confused, undoubtedly in the thrall of one of his quasi-psychological analyses. Astrid thought he might stop the lift at any moment and try to stick a hand up her dress. He was that kind of man, she was sure of it. She had first learned to recognise them when she was ten or twelve years old – the men who lived for the precise moment at which you recognised them as the kind of men who might stick their hand under your dress. Most of them seemed satisfied with simply being seen – this acknowledged their latent power and so they felt no need to do more. But there were also those who waited, who took pleasure in this shared recognition that they couldn't be reprimanded because they hadn't *done* anything yet, until one day, after many years of waiting, they would finally try to make good on their threat.

When the lift stopped on the ground floor and the doors opened, Norddal held out an arm to prevent them closing again. He gestured towards the hall with the other.

'Ladies first.'

Astrid wanted to say something that would put him in his place, but collected herself. Out in the corridor a white strip light flickered. The office walls were made of glass, everything translucent and bright as steel but dulled and scuffed up by time. Like a battered old sports car. Astrid liked the old-fashioned building. It must have been charmingly pretentious in its day; a symbol of optimism and faith in the future at a time when people were only just beginning to suspect the realities of their situation.

They reached the cafeteria, an oblong-shaped room with a refrigerated counter at one end. Beside the door was an antique vending machine, its red and white sign advertising soft drinks that were now forbidden in light of the sugar shortage. Astrid stopped just inside. Her new colleagues were gathered around one of the long tables and she was suddenly struck by the idea that this had all been arranged for her; that they were about to get to their feet and

break into an uneasy round of applause; that welcome banners would fall from the ceiling and she would have to stammer her way through a speech about how honoured she was to become one of Ålesund's new district court judges. But nobody turned to look at her. It was hard to imagine that these unfamiliar faces would one day become her friends, but she knew it would happen. She knew that she would need to ease into the group. She was good at discerning what was expected of her, good at fitting in.

Their gazes were fixed on a point at the other end of the room. Astrid took a seat at the table just in time to see the figure of Jan Rotgers appear on the floor by the counter.

Norwegian men and Norwegian women, began the party leader of the Pan-Ethical Alliance.

A bolt of delight and expectation ran through her.

Chapter 4

A few hours earlier Paul was still in the bath, thinking about Astrid and what her new job would mean for them. She wanted more free time – they could finally make good on some of their travel plans. She'd like to see the Taj Mahal; he could quite as happily go there as anywhere else. The most important thing was that they spend more time together. He played a couple of his favourite records from the British beat period on the automatic record player. His headache was subsiding; he'd made the right choice by not rushing to work. He had stolen a little time from an institution that was working towards eternity and used it to recollect himself. In doing so, he'd managed to rediscover something close to a sense of harmony.

But come to think of it – Paul reached for the coral sponge – the moment could of course be better. Had he bought himself a more modern shell, he could have amplified his sense of harmony with some beautiful sensations. He could have forked out enough for the impression of lying in the sand on some far-off beach; feel the burning sun on his face and hear the muffled *slap slap* of the sandal-wearing beach merchants who marched around selling coconuts. Or he might have streamed the song of the blue whale and the tremors it must create for someone swimming through the water's surface directly above the majestic animal's mating ritual. But, he reminded himself, he wasn't the sort of man who longed for these kinds of things. He was content to take a simple bath consisting of nothing but soap and

hot water. That was the kind of man he wanted to be. Someone modest and unpretentious, who could *make do and mend*, as his father would have said.

He wiggled his toes in the soft foam at the end of the bathtub, gazed up at the cumulus-shaped lamp. Half an hour passed. Then he stood up, dried himself off and put on a clean shirt. In the well-stocked bedroom wardrobe he found a grey, slightly creased linen jacket he felt exuded a kind of formal nonchalance, but without seeming too smart – or worse, fashionable. Once he had donned the jacket and a pair of dark jeans he finally made his way out. It was daybreak. Somewhere nearby a heron shrieked, or perhaps it was a badger.

A steep driveway led from the house down to the old county road, a hedge he couldn't remember the name of growing on either side. It had unruly brown branches that lost their leaves each winter. In the first few years he'd given them a going over with the hedge clippers, but it didn't ever seem to make much difference and so he had given up. From where he walked he could see the uppermost floors of the two neighbouring houses, a large detached property with a flat roof and a brick villa with a double garage. Neither of the houses were lit, at least not that he could see through the tall foliage. He hadn't met either of his neighbours – not that he felt the need to. When he and Astrid had moved here from their tiny apartment in the city it had been with expectations of a departure, a big change. At first they had truly believed the myth of the suburbs as a kind of different land – an illusion maintained by the large, open gardens, the trees and lakes. But it soon became apparent that the decline and decay here was even worse than in the city. Brief puffs of blue smoke rose from the chimneys at night, but never during daylight hours. Storm damage went unrepaired. Streetlamps lay fractured and splintered in the fields, like toothpicks at an extravagant dinner party that had ended in uncomfortable silence. What remained of the grass – that which hadn't been drowned in mud – was permitted to grow until it crept up the house walls, where a thick layer of green algae covered the rotting timber. It was a place people came to give up, step down, fade away in peace. As far as Paul knew, he and Astrid were among the youngest inhabitants within a radius of several kilometres.

The air was unusually mild, which Paul took as a bad sign. Violent rain, brutal wind – something or other was brewing. He picked up his pace. He'd inherited a bag from his father that advertised the winter Olympics in Tromsø, and which he always used on his way to and from work. With its brocade pattern representing the dwindling northern lights, it was demonstratively dated. Nobody had seen the aurora in fifteen years, and it pained people to be reminded of it. The undulating northern lights in the bag's fibre optic fabric had equally lost

some of their sheen and cast a futile, salmon pink glow over the deserted county road. Cars had long since ceased passing through here, but he felt safer with a light on nonetheless.

Some minutes later Paul stood at the local railway station and waited for the light at the crossing to turn green. He took out his shell, which also acted as a zone card on the trains; his entire body immediately began to prickle as inserted the battery. He felt a desperate desire to own a Laudà – it suddenly hit him, for the first time, that this object had something to do with movement and transport. A Laudà was a simpler, faster and more reasonable way of getting from A to B. He saw an unclear image of a small aircraft, or a kind of transport suit with its own tryptan motor, which would give him full command over where his body was located at any given moment. For a few seconds his every thought was frozen in spirals around this artificially prompted desire for a possibly non-existent object. Then the light turned green. He walked over the crossing, taking care not to step on the rails. In the distance he could hear the whispering of the tracks.

He passed the barrier, which registered his shell – he presumed it would simultaneously notify his employer that he was finally on his way to work. The brain had been reduced to a timecard. He boarded train B3 towards the city centre, as he did every morning. The worst of the rush was luckily over – aside from a small group of schoolchildren who sat silently in their seats staring blankly ahead of them, he was the only passenger.

He streamed his incoming messages as he leaned back in the comfortable seat. One of them was from the department management and had the subject line *A joyous day*. He then finally understood why he'd been dreading today so much – his younger colleague Edel Marie Tveit was due to present her doctoral thesis. Ever since he'd read her summary, Paul had been dropping hints – to anyone who would listen – that the project was a hair-raising one, but nobody seemed to agree with him. Tveit had identified a gene in cleaner fish that influenced the aging process of the skin. An eighty-year-old who had this gene implanted at embryo stage would continue to produce just as much natural collagen as a twenty-year-old. Management expected several overseas journalists to attend the press conference and the message, which he now streamed through with increasing scepticism and disgust, emphasised how important it was that these journalistic armchair politicians were warmly welcomed and provided with as much assistance as possible. Edel Marie Tveit was an unpalatable, ambitious young woman who had what it takes to become exceedingly rich. She was attractive, and always expressed herself with both certainty and empathy. Had Edel Marie Tveit owned a cheese factory like the one Astrid dreamed of starting, she would – instead of attempting to make the best cheese possible – have invented a cheese featuring a blinking surface, or a

cheese that played little jingles in your mouth. First and foremost, Paul thought, she had media appeal – that least conciliatory of all human traits.

When he emerged from the prosaically named *University station* some minutes later he took a right, walked down a wide marble staircase and headed towards the university campus. The university area he now entered was dominated by a soulless main building consisting of various uninspiring concrete rectangles, stacked on top of one another in what mostly resembled a child's first attempt at building something out of Lego. In front of it was a large open square, sunk half a metre into the ground and bordered by short runs of steps that were death traps in the winter. That's all it was – a large, open space. The best you could say about it was that it was designed more or less as a perfect square. Decades of shifting ambitions and architectural paradigms had resulted in what could only be termed *a mess*. The square was empty of people. The swarms of students Paul remembered from his own time studying here were nowhere to be seen. Nobody occupied the benches, flirting and spitting; no explosions of stolen chemicals could be heard, no din from slender, portable speakers. The area was enclosed by the kind of high, provisional steel fencing used during construction works, but nobody could remember who owned them or whether anything else would ever be built.

He walked through the outer gate, which recognised him and uttered a self-congratulatory fanfare. By the inner gate he greeted the security guard who sat in the tiny glass cabin, an agreeable and talkative guy in his fifties. Paul liked him. Had they met outside of work, at a Christmas party for example, he was sure they might have found plenty to talk about. He liked friendly, slightly simple folk.

Paul stepped before the gate and waited patiently for the guard to complete the scanning process. There must be some fault with the instruments, because he cursed loudly and banged on the panel. He spoke with a light, mid-European accent. A rosary hung in the window, a figure of the Virgin Mary dangling from it. Connected to her, by a short chain, was the suffering Jesus on the cross.

'Bloody thing's crashed. Just go on through, Abel.'

'Thanks. Bad day?'

'The worst so far.'

'Good to hear.'

The guard nodded towards the entrance with a smile.

'Good luck with the bright ideas, *herr überprofessor*,' he said.

'Enjoy sitting on your ass, *herr security guard*.'

They both chuckled. Paul set off for the entrance, but after a few steps turned and went back to the booth. The guard watched him, perplexed, as he stopped outside the window and reached through it with his hand.

'We've never properly met. Paul Abel.'

'We've met in here,' said the security guard, tapping his finger against his temple. He didn't seem to appreciate the gesture in the way Paul had imagined he would, but he took Paul's hand and squeezed it nonetheless. Paul's grip was harder than usual – he thought this was probably a trait common to security guards and wanted to show that he was familiar with such masculine pleasantries. They each measured the force of the other for a moment. Then, finally, the security guard smiled.

'Edmund Schiavo here.'

'Okay, Edmund Schiavo. See you later.'

'Yup, you can count on it,' Schiavo said.

Paul made his way towards the entrance, wishing that Astrid could have seen their encounter. She would have appreciated how he had taken the time to physically introduce himself to security guard Edmund Schiavo.

A lecture was already underway so it was quiet in the foyer; with quick steps Paul climbed the four floors up to the biology department and made his way into his office. Ten years ago he would have taken the stairs at a run, but for the past five he had made do with walking them. His office was the first in a row of eleven small cubicles; the lights were on in two of them. Slightly out of breath, he set down the empty bag and settled himself at the empty desk – the sight of it always depressed him. Oak laminate covered the office's every surface. No matter what progress humanity made on other fronts, it seemed as if the manufacturers of office furniture thought they had achieved their peak potential on the day they invented plastic-coated chipboard. He sat there for a couple of minutes, simply staring into space. He still had the irrefutable desire to skive off work for the day; the thought of standing there applauding Edel Marie Tveit's idiotic doctoral work made him queasy.

He pulled on a stained lab coat, even though he had no business in the laboratory this morning, then took out a two-cup cafetière from one of the desk drawers and put on the kettle, which he had hidden away behind the faded shutters of a dividing wall in defiance of the fire regulations. He brewed a cup of coffee and started to prepare for the day's teaching.

Half an hour later Paul stood in the classroom, which was on the same floor as the offices but hidden away on the damp, shady side of the building, behind a door warped by the incomprehensible heat of summer and methodical rain of winter, and so which no longer closed. When Paul complained about it, the only explanation he was given was that something had become *entrenched* in the building. The caretaker, a former carpenter who occupied an over-dimensioned workshop in the basement, obviously had no clue what the root of the problem was – something he tried to hide with aggressive obstinance. He lectured Paul on what he called his *old carpentry knowledge* within earshot of Paul's students. Heat and damp simply had this effect on old buildings, he said. Over time, fluctuations in pressure would create the tiniest shifts in the building's load-bearing structures, by extension giving rise to an insurmountable yet invisible void. Everyone was aware of this phenomenon, and those getting on in years knew that there was nothing that could be done about it. After the caretaker had left the classroom, accompanied by the students' equivocal collective gaze, Paul had walked down to his office and thrown a childish fit, in his rage spraining a thumb and breaking the lever that lifted and lowered his office chair. The chair had been locked in a position that was far too high for him ever since, which meant his legs dangled in the air when he sat on it.

The door was wide open, allowing Paul's voice to travel out into the empty, glass-encased corridors. He was in the middle of explaining reproduction in barnacles, which had replaced balanidae as topic of the day. Midway through a sentence he had the feeling that something was wrong, and stopped. Before him, the second year marine biology students sat and stared distractedly into space. Two of the students in the back row bent their heads towards one another, whispering.

'Hello? Do you understand what I'm saying?' Paul asked, although he couldn't think of anything he'd said that might be in the least incomprehensible.

Nobody reacted. He suspected they might be high on Oxytorol, or – more likely – they were sitting there streaming something far more interesting than marine biology. Perhaps they were keeping themselves entertained with a blow job, or relaxing on a beach in the historical Bahamas – as the islands used to be before they were overrun with aggressive crabs. He decided to ignore them.

'Most barnacles are hermaphrodites. I'll pass around the jar containing *Lepas anatifera*, so you can study it for yourselves.'

Paul started to weave his way between the rows of desks, something he did in the same pattern in every single class. When his words weren't getting though the movement made him feel as if he was achieving something.

‘The larvae float freely through the upper layers of water until they find something to attach themselves to. This might be a piece of rubbish or flotsam, a ship, or even a large mammal. Then they start to develop. As adults they’re around eight to ten centimetres in length, including the peduncle.’

One of the more out of touch students, a young man wearing an *all-over*, stood up. The close-fitting, all-in-one garment was the latest fashion – waterproof and breathable, made of a composite material from recycled plastic bottles – and the kind of people who wore it were those who had something to prove. The guy sauntered straight out of the classroom without uttering a word. The rest of the class now finally woke up, looking expectantly at Paul to see what he would do. He knew he should demand that the student return and give him a talking-to, but couldn’t be bothered to make a scene. Maybe ten years ago, he thought, but not today, and probably never again. He continued to wander between the desks as if nothing had happened.

‘Darwin devoted eight years to studying these crustaceans before he developed his theory on the origin of species. He systematised them by homologies, that is by structural similarities that indicated they were of the same origin before mutations made them branch off to become different subclasses. Darwin’s classifications of barnacles continue to be an important work of reference today, two hundred years after *A Monograph on the Sub-Class Cirripedia* was published. Isn’t that incredible? Imagine discovering knowledge so rock solid that people would continue to benefit from it two hundred – even two thousand – years later!’

Paul realised he was standing and waving his arms in the air, suddenly carried away by the thought of Darwin’s accomplishments. It was so monumental, what Darwin had done, so unbelievably momentous for all posterity. Paul thought he detected a careful smile from Maria Alme over by the window. He sat down at his desk, embarrassed.

‘Or has everything already been thought; everything already been discovered? Anyone have any thoughts on that?’

The students groaned. They hated having to think, and liked to think *about thinking* least of all. Every once in a while, Paul had the feeling that he’d managed to get through to one or two of them – he might see a curious twitch, a hand thrust into the air to ask a provoking or at least intelligent question. In this class there was only one such student, a skittish and pale-faced guy named Dag Teslow. He was sharp and cripplingly shy, as Paul himself had been in his student days. The difference was that while Paul had hardly ever missed a lecture, Dag Teslow was absent most of the time due to a number of physical complaints. Paul glanced across at the empty desk. He wanted the best for the young man.

‘Okay, finally here’s something that might interest you: the *Lepas* has the largest penis in the animal kingdom. Fully extended, it’s around two-thirds the length of its body.’

It never failed – within ten seconds they were making exactly the same jokes as those made by the kids of fourteen year groups before them. Paul let the laughter and sniggering flow for a while as he sat and looked at the formaldehyde-filled jars that stood ready on his desk. When the vulgarities had finally subsided, he passed the jars around the classroom, asking the students to be careful. The glass vessels changed hands with incredible slowness as dead eyes scanned their contents.

‘Around ten years ago we observed an extreme and sudden growth in the number of *Lepas* in the Norwegian Sea. The consequences…’

All heads suddenly lifted. Paul felt it himself – the burning sensation in his frontal lobe that meant a stream was incoming; this was immediately followed by a message flowing fast and cold into the Brodmann and Wernicke areas of the brain. It wasn’t so much a voice as a series of images and symbols, drawn on the mind’s rough canvas using the electrode’s complex series of electromagnetic shocks. Together, they formed an announcement in a language Paul had spent many years learning to decode, but which for these kids – who had grown up with the shell – was just as natural and easily understandable as a conversation across the dinner table. The message was disturbingly brief.

All employees and students are requested to stop their work immediately and muster in the mingling area for a briefing of the utmost national importance.

Paul wrinkled his brow. All streams he received were subdued and crackling. His handheld model was now completely discontinued – he would often completely misunderstand the purpose of the information being communicated. At least once a week, he worried about incidents that never took place, or desired things that didn’t exist. His students looked at him expectantly. He couldn’t just stand there looking like an idiot – he was the *leader* in the room, a thought that made him equally baffled every time he was reminded of it.

‘It’s best we do as they say,’ he said.

The students got up and pushed their chairs under their desks. A couple of them moved across to the window to look down at the street.

‘What’s going on?’ asked Dina Kogel in a worried voice. She was a bright girl, her hair twisted into a pretzel-shaped bun. It must take her several hours each morning; Paul had often wondered whether she slept with it that way.

‘I’m afraid we’re about to be made into cleaner fish,’ said Paul. ‘But it’ll probably be quick and fairly painless. Just do as they say – go where they said you should go.’

Dina Kogel gave him a strange look, but turned and left the room. He let the students go on ahead while he collected up the jars containing the specimens. There were six of them, too many for him to carry all at once. He would have to make do with the three he cared most about for the moment. With the utmost care, he stacked them into a little pyramid. He wished he could just go to his office and sit there and mope until it was all over. With a brief command to the shell he turned off the lights.

As he moved out into the hall he heard an expectant hum rising from the ground floor. The cold February light was reflected in the corridor's polished tradyl coating, making it look like dark blue ice. A stocky figure came out of one of the department offices up ahead, shrugging into a brown blazer as he did so. Paul had to admit that it was a stylish piece of clothing – it wasn't improbable that it was a genuine *Fasciné*. The man wearing it was Head of Department Viggo Dybvik, a man Paul couldn't stand. Dybvik positioned himself in the middle of the narrow hall; Paul trudged reluctantly towards him.

'Hello, Abel. Did you not get the message? We're to gather in the mingling area.'

Dybvik had the whitest teeth Paul had ever seen – he guessed they'd been enamelled in new *shadow white* or *edelweiss*. According to the advertisement, these were the year's most popular shades. Paul returned Dybvik's smile apologetically, hating himself for acting inferior.

'I know. I just wanted to put these away first,' he said, holding out the jars.

'I'm sure *immediately* means something along the lines of *right now*,' said Dybvik.

It wouldn't have been a problem to let Paul go to his office, put down the jars and then go to the gathering. It would have taken a minute, perhaps even less. They stared at each other for a moment. Dybvik was a big, tall man with grey hair – the Mafioso type who would have made a better politician than a university employee. Ever since Dybvik took over the department, he and Paul had been party to what the university management neatly termed 'a difficult dialogue.' The cause of this was clear: Paul undertook the kind of research that never made money, and he was notoriously unwilling to find personal sponsors or deliver popular lectures that might attract potential investors. Dybvik, on the other hand, was responsible for making the department profitable. To him, Paul was just an item of expenditure – and one that wasn't particularly popular with the students at that.

'Well then I suppose I'll have to take them down into the crowd with me.'

'It looks like it,' said Dybvik.

'You know that they're irreplaceable? You know I've paid for them myself, seeing as the university thinks it's so *reactionary* to use physical specimens?'

‘I’m sure you’ll manage. Come on.’

Paul, who still had every intention of skiving off the press conference, turned on his heel. Under Dybvik’s gaze he walked towards the long, open staircase that led down to the ground floor. It was impossible to sneak away. As he was about to take the first step down he made some exaggerated, staggering movements intended to illustrate how difficult it was to balance his valuable load. A fifteen-centimetre-long brown tentacle waved helplessly at him from one of the jars. At the top of the peduncle (the anatomically correct name for what others often called ‘the stalk’) gleamed white plates outlined in black. Ebay seller *ChrisPuntas33* had presented a somewhat dubious certificate that claimed the specimen was obtained from Charles Darwin’s private collection following his voyage on the *Beagle*. The two other jars contained the creature’s relatives: a crab attacked by the parasitic *Sacculina*, and *Ibla idiotica* – newly discovered in a Norwegian setting. The latter had only previously been found off New Zealand, but over the past year had popped up in several trawl nets off the coast at Trøndelag. It had been the source of many bad jokes among the staff in recent weeks – not only because of its catchy name, but also because of the fairly astonishing way in which it propagated. Inside one of the female’s orifices lived an inner harem of stubby, short-lived males, whose only purpose in life was to supply the female with sperm before quickly meeting their doom.

People flocked from the offices towards the stairs; to Paul’s right was a large glass wall through which he could see the former European Road. Behind it was the narrow Nørva Sound, rippling exhaustedly under a shower of rain. A row of old wooden boats were moored in front of the Sunnmøre Museum, relics of Norway’s long seafaring history, now in its final death throes. The *Borgundknarren*, a staggering replica of a Viking ship, bobbed there against the *Heland*, a weather-beaten old fishing cutter used to ferry Norwegian refugees to Shetland during the Second World War. To his left the stairs were open, providing him a view straight down into the mingling area. Just a low railing protected him from the long drop. He had to fight the urge to release one of the jars over the edge, like a bomb. The surface of the floor below was broken up by some enormous green plants, along with tables the student organisations used to advertise their edifying objectives. To the north, a large brick wall curved around the largest auditorium; two long lines of students poured out of its doors. The management must really be desperate for attention, Paul thought, if they were prepared to disturb the entire university’s schedule like this. A large crowd thronged around the podium at the eastern end of the building. With his gaze turned on the gathering, Paul almost collided with a young man quickly striding up the steps towards him – to his surprise, Paul saw that it

was Dag Teslow, his gifted student. Teslow was unusually tall due to the rare connective tissue disorder Marfan syndrome; it also meant that his spine was hunched as bindweed. At least he had a certifiable diagnosis, thought Paul – something studied and described by science, and not just another one of these vague *problems* that so many of his students moaned about.

'Running a little late? And going the wrong way, I think,' said Paul.

'Sorry. I had a migraine,' said Teslow, as if that should explain why he was on his way up when everyone else was on their way down.

'I'll stream you today's assignments. And then you can pop in to take a look at these when you have time,' said Paul, lifting the jars slightly.

Teslow's mouth tugged upwards into an apologetic smile as he stepped aside.

Paul had given up all hope of disappearing and let himself be carried along by the steady stream of people. Down among the jumble he walked gingerly towards the stage, taking care not to bump into anyone. A polite nod was thrown his way here and there, but most of the crowd ignored him. Among the staff and students that surrounded him were only a handful he could say that he knew. He had never exchanged so much as a word with most of them.

He stopped where the crowd started to grow dense; surely the presentation couldn't last long. Now that his teaching had been interrupted he could go straight to a late, long lunch in the cafeteria, mark some papers, and then go home. They could pick up where they left off tomorrow. He and Astrid could enjoy another couple of bottles of wine – there was an entire crate of them in the basement – and then they could go to bed. Lately, Astrid had been more interested in sex than she had been in a long time. It was probably down to the change of job; more organised days, the prospect of less stress.

He caught sight of Edel Marie Tveit, protagonist of the day, just up ahead in the crowd. Their gazes met – she looked just as confused as he was. He supposed she was nervous, which at least indicated a certain level of humanity. He couldn't help but admire her appearance, athletic and stately. She stood almost a head taller than the other women – she was probably even taller than Astrid, somewhere around 1.80 m. What a waste, he thought, an intelligent, attractive person using her abilities to search for the elixir of youth. But he couldn't deny her sharpness. Every time he spoke to her he feared she'd seen through some lie of his – that she was simply waiting for it to be revealed to everyone around them.

A young man forced his way through the throng. As he passed Paul he gave him a jab in the ribs – it probably wasn't on purpose, and nor was it particularly hard, but it was enough

for Paul to lose his grip on the jars. *Idiotica* slid along beside *Lepas anatifera* and was plummeting towards the floor before Paul managed to stop it; the jar containing *Sacculina*, which was balanced on top, couldn't be saved. With a pained moan the jar hit the ground, where it smashed against the tiles with a wet crack. A shiny, viscous puddle spread across the floor, releasing the bitter stench of formaldehyde. Those nearby took a few steps back, wrinkling their noses; Paul was left standing at the centre of a small, tightly-packed ring of people. He considered the massacre in silence. The crab had split open in the fall; its bloated, pale tissue lay curled on the floor like a hunk of soggy bread. The man next to Paul, an older guy who worked in reception and who always exuded a strong odour of pine needles, glared at him insistently until Paul had no choice but to return his gaze.

'You should be more careful,' said the receptionist.

'It wasn't my fault,' mumbled Paul, tightening his grip on the two remaining jars.

'Is this your jar? If you hadn't brought them down here, this wouldn't have happened.'

Paul didn't have the energy to even try to explain.

'Yes, well, let's leave it at that,' he said bitterly.

Another voice from behind him caused him to turn around.

'It can't just lay there on the floor like that. Someone might slip on it.'

It was Edel Marie Tveit, who had come over to see what all the fuss was about. Paul was afraid he might say something he'd later regret. He looked about for something to wipe up the mess with – meanwhile, several newcomers arrived at the back of the crowd, causing the ring around him to contract. Those who hadn't witnessed the accident tramped around in the broken glass and what had once been a parasite-infested crab. Paul willingly allowed himself to be moved along by the crowd, and was soon several metres away from the scene of the crime.

Finally Paul caught sight of a familiar – if not exactly friendly – face. He moved to stand beside a short man in his fifties with a hopeless goatee, who stood clutching a coffee cup as he was shoved back and forth. It was Arne Blindheim, Paul's closest colleague.

'Couldn't they have just streamed it to us in our offices? How can this *product launch* possibly be this important? I don't understand the point of these theatrics,' said Blindheim.

'Thanks for the precise summary,' said Paul.

With the possible exception of Schiavo the security guard, Blindheim was the closest thing Paul had to a friend at the university. They'd worked together at the start of the *Lepas* project, before Blindheim had been made responsible for molecular programming for a sea urchin farmer in Jæren. Now his job was to get the poor creatures to produce as many

offspring as possible under the most miserable conditions possible. In their too rare conversations they seemed to share a world view that hovered somewhere between the morbid and the stoic.

'Bloody people,' snarled Blindheim, trying to rub a drop of coffee off his shirt with his free hand. They turned their attention to the podium just in time to see the most momentous event in Norwegian political history.

The stage before them lit up, and a famous figure came into view – it wasn't until this moment that Paul understood this was something far more serious than a bad congratulatory speech. He was filled with a strong sense of unreality, as if he had suddenly gone from sober to drunk in the space of a second. Shouts and murmurs spread through the large premises – many of Paul's colleagues seemed to be reacting as he was, with confusion and distrust. A couple of younger guys, the kind who can always be spotted wearing skis in winter and hiking boots in summer, slapped each other on the back and clapped.

'Jan Rotgers,' said Blindheim. 'What the fuck does that lunatic want?'

Norwegian men and Norwegian women. Today the Pan-Ethical Alliance has removed the Norwegian government from office, began the party leader in a stream so deep that even with his poor machinery Paul felt the violent electrostatic shivers pass through his prefrontal cortex and deep into his hippocampus.

Chapter 5

The Pan-Ethical Alliance had entered the political scene twenty years earlier as a completely insignificant party – just another oddity in the increasingly wild forest of political groups. They had some good, but laughable, ambitions. Unlike most of the many other environmental parties – the Christians had one, the Muslims another, and the right their own – they had a radical, specific and all-encompassing plan as to how Norwegians would become the first population in the world to live completely sustainably. The most fundamental change was that all consumption would be made subject to state control, to such an extent that it would no longer be necessary to circulate money among the country's citizens. A fully automated and need-based food programme would ensure that everyone had enough to eat – or almost enough, at least. Ninety percent of the country's food would come from the outstanding new developments in laboratory-produced proteins, through which muscle cells were grown around microscopic carbohydrate frameworks. The remaining ten per cent would have to

come from people's own gardens, a disciplinary exercise that would put the population in touch with the naturality that formed the basis of the Pan-Ethical ideology. The solution to service needs was almost equally simple: since everyone would be an employee of the Alliance, they would receive or supply services based on their ability and needs, and accrue credit in the Alliance's banks and businesses. Norway's foremost international currency – that is, the country's relatively untouched natural resources, now unique in the world – would form the basis for a new and complex virtual commodity that would in turn pull Norway out of the financial crisis. The residential densification process, which was already well underway, would be increased to the extreme through the construction of austere housing estates extending from the towns in a radius of no more than ten kilometres. The submitted architectural drawings were reminiscent of flattened homages to Le Corbusier's *Unité d'habitation*, spread across the suburbs in an even layer of blocks. Lodged here, under the Alliance's protective hand, inhabitants would concede all personal privileges in an absolute equalization of the economy.

Paul remembered how his parents had fought as they had read the election campaign pamphlet that had been left in their mailbox one Saturday afternoon. He was on one of his visits home, which as his studies became more demanding were becoming increasingly rare. The pamphlet was a simple A4 sheet of paper, folded in two. On the front page was a photograph of a typical Norwegian spruce forest, backlit to create a soft sheen across the steaming treetops. The pamphlet was titled 'We know the way back.' Jon Abel had read aloud to Paul and his mother Eva as they sat on the sofa, chewing on pieces of pizza.

Once, humans comprised a single, great community. But today there are many who become rich by elevating themselves above the whole. These people will tell you that you are first and foremost an ***individual****. And they want you to express your individuality through consumerism.*

The fight to preserve the Norwegian environment has for far too many years been comprised of nothing but indolent theatrics. The Pan-Ethical Alliance is here to pull down the set and burn down the stage. So-called green growth *has shown its true capitalistic nature. The only truly sustainable growth happens in nature. Only through nature can we preserve our bond to all things – to the force that is Pan.*

Fellow humans: this is our last chance. Together, we must find the way back to a natural state. Only you can open the door to your inner wilderness – but we would like to help you turn the key. This is why we will be running in this year's local elections. A vote for the

Pan-Ethical Alliance is a vote for the trees, for the fish – for life. It is a vote for a world in which the market is no longer the only thing that matters. It is a vote for a world in which ***everything*** *belongs to everyone.*

At the bottom, behind the ivy-enveloped 'P' that was already the party's logo, was a motto:

The Pan-Ethical Alliance: Can you feel the grass grow?

As he read this final sentence, Jon Abel tried to put on what was supposed to be deep, gravelly voice, but his natural countertenor was so high that the result was painfully croaky. He looked expectantly at his wife and son.

'It's so easy to make fun. I take it that you don't agree?' said Eva Abel.

'No.'

'I think it's actually quite nice,' said Eva, her expression defiant.

'Jesus, Eva. It's so easy to see through it. It's nothing but another religion, another trend. People are afraid, and these idiots want to use that fear.'

'But you care about the environment, don't you?'

Jon Abel's shoulders shook, seemingly uncontrollably, as if he had just tasted something sour.

'Genuinely, yes! I enjoy talking a walk through the forest, if that's what you mean. But I don't need to make a bloody communistic pot-smoking *thing* of it. This is no different to a lifestyle column. Look, they're even distributing it on dead trees – that says all you need to know about how serious they are,' he said, waving the piece of paper before her.

Paul had only just turned twenty at the time. In this first year, the Alliance ran for office in the local elections of three Norwegian municipalities, endorsed by armchair ecologists, crystal collectors and random members of the public from alternative expositions who would gladly put their name to anything that seemed like it might counteract the faithlessness currently prevalent within society. Thanks to their entertainment value, the Pan-Ethical Alliance gained admittance to a number of national debates and pseudo-political television shows. Paul, who had never believed the party to be serious, understood why they had become so attractive all too well. Through their so-called *civilised* debates, the other political parties had merged into a well-meaning, lukewarm stew, and conveyed their messages from this drowning pool of social democracy with the professional intonation of career politicians. Behind the effective

formulations of the communications advisors lurked a desperation that was never permitted to shine through; sincere frustration, dedication and trust were lacking among Norway's politicians. Journalists no longer had any serious correctives or counter-voices to turn to when they wanted to bring matters up for debate, but then came the Pan-Ethical circus like a gift to the Norwegian election campaign at a time when the country was experiencing something close to a depression.

The search for sources of income that could replace the oil had failed miserably, just as many economists had foreseen. The efforts had been too little, too late. Indeed, Norway had established a range of subsidies intended to stimulate so-called innovation in the 2010s, and many small enterprises had been started. But the only ones to survive were those which invented new consumer goods that could be produced cheaply and sold at a high price, as well those that managed to create new service needs and meet them with cheap, imported labour. This was no different to how the western economy had functioned for almost a hundred years, and Scandinavia was the region of the world where capitalism had succeeded best of all. It was therefore impossible to eradicate the concept of an ever-increasing consumer spiral. And as long as everyone was aware of this waste of the world's resources – pointed to it and said *yes, I know I'm an asshole for contributing to it* – everyone was free to continue. Self-insight came to be regarded as equivalent to absolution, but this unfortunately had no lasting effect on the surroundings, and increasingly perplexed political leaders finally decided to take action.

The downscaling of the oil industry was in full swing by 2025 and caused the first real halt to real wage growth since 2016; the end of private motoring forced people to move from their homes in rural areas to the cities. At the start of the 2030s the cocoa shortage began to seriously tax people's patience, and when the grain harvest in Europe failed catastrophically for the third year in a row, there was no Norwegian grain store to meet the need for white breads and other similar baked goods. Most of the agricultural land was buried under asphalt.

In the 2030s the country was finally overwhelmed by the challenges that the rest of Europe had been living with for generations – the unemployed and angry; growing fascism, migration, violence and apathy – and then what happens to a population that lives like fat farmed fish as the nets burst around them finally became clear. After the second major housing market crash in a decade, unemployment in Norway reached a level equal to that in Greece, which at the time was the highest in Europe at 18 per cent. This was a population that had once lived under strict religious admonishment and pietism, which helped to make Norway's inhabitants the richest in the world. They had accepted restraint because of the prospect of a kind of heaven – the notion of endless abundance at journey's end. This illusion

had now vanished, and Norwegians found a new freedom in the right to despair. The demonstrations, which Paul refused to participate in because they reminded him of festivals, were politically worthless. Their slogans seemed carelessly thrown together at the last minute and borrowed elements from feminism, anti-capitalism, pro- and anti-fascism and animal rights to form a new product: resistance and activism as a lifestyle product.

But the despair from which the protests grew was real enough. While the government reported on their packages of measures the country's citizens screamed for guidance. By the start of the 2040s the coalition government consisting of the Liberal Party, Green Party, Centre Party and Democrats was forced to watch the country's inhabitants succumb to despondency, suspicion, suicide and hate, and after the second crash the country's political leaders suffered a post-traumatic inability to act. Years of intense public self-reproach and promises of new investigative committees followed – a time in which the country was effectively without political leadership.

It was during the lead up to all this that the Pan-Ethical Alliance was founded. Like most other people, Paul viewed these newcomers as a more bombastic and radical alternative to the conservative Green Party – a party which had never quite managed to build a bridge between environmentalism and the capitalism from which they didn't seem eager to distance themselves. But with their desire to abolish the monetary system in its entirety, the Pan-Ethical Alliance went way too far in the opposite direction in Paul's view. To him, they were simply too eccentric to be taken seriously. *The only path to real change is through faith*, said Jan Rotgers at one of the party leader debates that first year – a statement that Paul immediately classified as belonging to the spiritual twaddle that seemed to be becoming increasingly prevalent in Norway as relative poverty increased.

'Faith in holy and sacrosanct nature must replace the false gods of the market. Fundamentalism has a poor reputation, but it is the only thing that can save the world from destruction. Under all other circumstances, individuals will only continue to put themselves first – not because we are evil, but because market forces have taught us that consumerism is the only way to express ourselves, attract a partner and therefore survive. To save the planet, we must dare to succumb to *blind faith*.'

In total, the Pan-Ethical Alliance gathered a few thousand votes in the local elections in which they participated; two years later, to the majority's astonishment, they were able to claw themselves a seat in the general election due to tens of thousands of protest votes. These voters were the same alternative freaks as before, but this time they were accompanied by the angry, young and unemployed, as well as a number of urban, well-educated middle-aged

constituents with good incomes, who for reasons of conscience had renounced God and therefore missed the fantastical and *outrageous* aspects of life. To affirm one's allegiance to nature was an all-in-one solution for the post-pseudo-modern individual. It marked both a necessary reckoning with the sins of the forefathers and a certain propensity to the playful new age spirituality that anyone wishing to distinguish themselves as a thinking, mid-century being couldn't afford to ignore.

Even though much of the Pan-Ethical Alliance's popularity could be ascribed to such intellectual trends, it was mostly down to the group's founder, Jan Rotgers. He was the kind of figure that had never before been seen in Norwegian politics. The thickset, energetic thirty-five-year-old was the son of Dutch immigrants, a carpenter and a social worker, who had taken over a farm at Vinstra and made it big on their production of traditional handicrafts and local, high-quality ham. Rotgers was an extremely eloquent speaker, and expressed his genuine despair at the ecological catastrophe using his gift for rhetoric. He stared into the cameras with the disquieting gaze of a hunted man, and in just seconds could suddenly become so gleefully offensive that it was hard not to imagine a chorus of reckless prompters just out of view. Even when what he had to say wasn't particularly original or even true – which in Paul's view was most of the time – it seemed as if he was speaking from an entirely different place to the other politicians, using unfamiliar turns of phrase and a pathos so shameless you couldn't help but admire his brazenness. Nor did it hurt that he was exceptionally attractive. According to a columnist in the Morgenbladet newspaper, his appearance made one think of French actor Pierre Clémenti in his role as the gangster Marcel in Luis Buñuel's *Belle de Jour*. Even Paul could sense the impact of that face – a face simultaneously innocent and witty, a dandy with the mind of a Machiavelli.

Rotgers' charm was enough to gain the Pan-Ethical Alliance a few months in the limelight, but there was one central incident that would transform him into the climate catastrophe's key witness. During his first term in office, an inconceivable natural disaster hit Zeeland in the Netherlands. At around 5 am on 25 November, the Eastern Scheldt storm surge barrier collapsed as a result of number of unfortunate circumstances. Extreme precipitation and a hurricane with gusts measuring over 320 kilometres an hour coincided with a total power outage, which meant that only nine of the sixty-two sluice gates closed. None of the back-up systems functioned, and sabotage was suspected from day one. Water surged into the lowlands at a speed that made evacuation unthinkable. Not even the floods of 1953 caused anywhere near the destruction that now unfolded. The first reports were of 1,984 dead; after twenty-four hours 33,222 people were confirmed to have perished and twice as many were

missing. Throughout it all, people across the world were supplied with the sharpest and most detailed images of intense human suffering ever to be produced – the incident was described as the first time the world understood and truly felt the consequences of global warming. It was no longer something abstract – something that happened *elsewhere* – or the figures in a calculation. It was physical, repulsive and close – and disseminated through the age's most advanced medium for virtual reality: MU glasses. Using these, viewers could be there, right at the heart of the devastation. With 360 degree images and at least as many degrees of sound, twenty-three-year-old Paul Abel *was* in Zeeland, even though he sat in his bedsit at home in Ålesund. People stood on the roofs of houses, waving their arms. He saw the outlines of mothers and fathers swaying in the treetops, babies swaddled to their chests using damp sheets. Together with millions of viewers he sat safely at home wearing his magic glasses, watching the events as they unfolded, while at the same moment these other people in their hour of greatest need stood and waved at a floating collective eye that could do nothing but *watch*. Watch until the sun came up, and the enormity of the destruction was revealed to a weeping world.

That autumn, as tens of thousands of bloated, battered corpses continued to wash ashore along the entire coast from Vlieland to Calais, the Pan-Ethical Alliance's popularity increased. Not as the result of some collective realisation, but as the upshot of the magnificent theatrics of grief. Two days before the storm surge barrier burst, Jan Rotgers had sent his daughter Irma off to spend her first summer holiday alone with her grandparents. The ten-year-old girl hadn't stood a chance as the water flooded in through the doors and windows, cascading under the cladding of her grandfather's little two-storey house in Stavenisse as she slept, while her father, back at home, practised for a cooking competition between Norway's party leaders that was due to be broadcast on live TV.