

The Courier

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Original Title: *Kurieren*

Published by: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 2015

Foreign Rights: Gyldendal Agency

Winner of the Brage Prize 2015

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Sverre Fenstad sits down on the stool. It has been with him all his life. His father knocked it together for his fourth birthday. A birch seat with four round, neatly embedded, legs. It has travelled with him and been stuffed into the loft and into the cellar. Now he has found a use for it again after thirty years.

He leans forward. With his pocket knife he loosens a plank in the floor. Carefully he lifts the board and rests it against the wall of the storage room without a sound. In the hollow space beneath are the components. He takes them out one by one and assembles them calmly on the floor. Two batteries, which he connects to two leads. These he attaches to the radio. Then he fastens the twisted cable to the head set and puts it on.

A door closes outside the storage room.

He removes the head set. Without standing up from the stool, he raises his hand and opens the door a fraction. The reflection from the light bulb on the untreated woodwork endows the spacious drying loft with a warm, yellow glow.

He hears footsteps and further narrows the gap between the door and the frame. A plump woman with a basket of laundry under her arm comes into the loft. She stops by the first clothes line. Starts hanging up her wet linen. Humming as she works.

Sverre Fenstad likes her. He likes her curves, likes how she is unaware that he is watching her. Her body is hidden by the sheet and duvet cover. Her fingers run along the clothes line. And her legs move beneath the laundry. It's like some dance in a dream, Sverre thinks, following her ankles with his eyes. Her full figure reappears. The basket is empty. She leaves.

He sits still until he hears the loft door closing. Then he puts the head set back on, clicks the switch and waits. The radio takes time to warm up, but soon he hears a faint hiss. Locating the station is a sensitive business. He searches. There is noise from the German noise jammers. A voice from Berlin, a whistling, short snatches of music. Until he finds London, and silence. He checks his wrist watch. A few minutes to go. He grabs the pencil from behind his ear. Moistens the tip with his tongue. Sticks his hand in his breast pocket for the piece of paper. Then he hears the signal, da-da-da-daaaa – the opening bars of Beethoven's Fifth. Then the reader's voice. Sverre jots down the codes.

Finally he returns the piece of paper to his shirt pocket. He switches off the radio. Removes the head set. Rolls up the leads. Puts all the components back into the hollow space. Gets to his feet

and replaces the board. Checks the floor is even before leaving the loft storage room, locks the padlock and goes out.

He walks downstairs to his own flat, but stops on the landing above; on the step outside his door sits a man with a rucksack between his legs.

Sverre regrets having put the codes into his breast pocket. He should have learned them by heart and burned them. But he doesn't hesitate any longer. He continues down the stairs at the same speed, as the man looks up. Sverre is relieved. It is Gerhard sitting there. Gerhard Falkum, code name *Gammern*. Sverre stops next to him. But he doesn't speak. He unlocks the flat and holds open the door.

Fenstad closes the door behind them. He is annoyed that Gerhard has come here like this. It shouldn't happen. Before he can say anything though, his guest speaks. His voice is low and quivers. 'I know coming here is against the rules, but I have no one else to turn to.'

Gerhard passes him a rolled-up newspaper.

Sverre unfolds it. The evening edition of *Aftenposten*. His annoyance grows further. 'I've got it.'

'Read,' Gerhard says, pointing to an article on the front page.

'I've read it. It's about a dead person.'

'It's Åse.'

Sverre glances from the newspaper to Gerhard and sees the state he is in. The situation is quite different from what he had at first assumed.

'Åse is the dead person.'

Gerhard's face is drawn, his eyes are intense and the hand holding the newspaper is shaking.

'The police were in the block when I arrived. I don't know what happened. Don't know if anything had happened at all. Suddenly there's a Gestapo man in the door and the biddy next door is shouting that I'm the husband of the woman who died. I'm standing there with my rucksack on my back. Which contains my gun. I have to leg it.'

Gerhard loses balance and grabs the door frame.

Sverre reacts at once. Opens the kitchen door. 'Here. Take a seat.'

They go into the kitchen. The blinds are drawn.

'I don't know what's happened to Åse and my daughter, Sverre. I don't know what's happened.'

'Number 13,' Sverre answers instinctively. 'Don't call me by my name.' At the same time he thinks, what a stupid thing to say, he is at home in his own flat. And there he is, reprimanding a man who has just lost his wife and has had a terrible shock. The situation is tense. The Gestapo have probably already got patrols out after Gerhard Falkum. And he's here.

Gerhard can't say for sure what has happened. Which means neither he nor Gerhard, nor any of the others, knows the full scope of the events. Sverre needs information and fast. He can see how powerless Gerhard feels, and he sympathises. They are fighting a war every day in Oslo. Then disaster befalls an innocent woman, a young mother. *Found dead*. What is the truth behind those words?

'Could she have committed suicide?'

'Why would Åse take her own life?'

Sverre is about to answer, but doesn't get that far.

'We've got a daughter. She never lets her out of her sight. So why would she kill herself?'

'Health?'

'What are you saying? Åse's as strong as an ox.'

A housewife can't just die in her own home, Sverre thinks. Then he says: 'You know what this might mean, don't you?'

'What?'

'Someone must have murdered her.'

Sverre notices Gerhard blanch. Sverre turns away, stares at the wall and thinks all manner of bleak thoughts as he listens with half an ear to Gerhard blaming himself, hears him say he shouldn't have gone into the mountains. He should have been with Åse and the girl. Taken care of them.

Thoughts race through Sverre's mind. A young mother, strong. Wife of a well-trusted Resistance man, and the Gestapo are involved. Could Nazis be behind this? But how and why?

'We know nothing,' Sverre says, as much to himself as his guest. He looks into Gerhard's eyes again. 'Are you sure the Gestapo were there?'

'Of course I'm sure.'

Sverre raises both hands in defence. 'It's just so strange. When someone dies, accidentally or not, it's a case for the Norwegian police. It's got nothing to do with the Sicherheitspolizei.'

'The man was Gestapo, he wore a uniform and spoke German.'

'But why the Gestapo?'

'How the hell should I know?'

Sverre raised his hands again. 'I'm just trying to understand what might have happened.'

Gerhard gets up and holds onto the edge of the table. 'When I left, there was a suitcase containing copies of *London News* in the kitchen – but Hilde came before that.'

'Hilde?'

'The courier. Ester.'

'Of course.'

'She came to pick up the suitcase. Ester's trustworthy. She must have taken it with her. I'm sure there wasn't a single newspaper in the flat.'

'Weapons?'

'A gun. But well hidden.'

'Nothing a police search would turn up?'

'They would have to take apart the fireproof wall. For all I know, they may have done. I have no idea.'

They are silenced by their thoughts. Sverre takes a deep breath, but cannot repress a note of reprimand. He says: 'So you ran off with the Gestapo at your heels, and of all the places you could have gone, you came here, to me!'

They stare at each other. Sverre can see that Gerhard has to control himself. He can almost hear the man on the chair counting to ten before answering: 'I can promise you one thing, Sverre. No one has followed me here. This happened several hours ago. I've been lying low and waiting until it was dark.'

'How long were you on the stairs?'

'Two or three minutes. No more than that.'

'Anyone walk past while you were waiting?'

Gerhard shook his head.

Sverre deliberates. 'We have to know more. For the time being it's best if you stay here.' He glances at his watch and calculates what he can achieve in an evening. He takes a decision. Then he goes from room to room in the flat checking all the blinds are down. Turns the light off in the sitting room. He calls into the kitchen.

'If you feel tired you can sleep in the guest room.'

He points to the door and opens it so that Gerhard can see in. 'The bed's made.'

He flicks off his slippers and slides his feet into a pair of brown walking shoes in the hall.

'Don't wait up for me.'

Gerhard's eyes are wide open. 'What are you going to do? Where are you going?'

'Out,' Sverre Fenstad says, grabbing the coat off the hat stand. 'I'm going to see what I can find out.'

II

Around the tables, there is a loud buzz of conversation. Sverre is on his own. He plays with the cutlery. If nothing else it will give the impression of eccentricity, he thinks. Sitting and staring at the table, swapping round the knife and fork, deep in thought, apparently unconcerned, Sverre Fenstad, a nobody at a table in Studia, Observatoriegata 2. He has taken a seat at the far end of the room, a corner table with four high-backed chairs. He is sitting on the edge of his chair to keep an eye on the entrance. His fidgeting with the eating implements is a result of the interest he can sense he has stirred among the clientele sitting at the small tables lined against the wall. Most of the customers are German officers accompanied by their Norwegian paramours. Sverre stands out: a man not in uniform, not under orders, not with a woman. He looks up, scans the room without meeting anyone's eye. Time for his knife and fork to change places again. Killing time.

At last there is some movement by the head waiter's chair near the entrance. Sverre smiles at Vera as she enters. She is wearing a tight, short-sleeved, apricot dress which suits her very well. With matching gloves. Her heels make her as tall as the head waiter. She is bare-headed. Her blonde hair is held in place with clips and shows off her chubby neck. A wake of admiring gazes follows the figure wending its way between the tables.

Sverre Fenstad stands up. 'Dear Vera, it's so nice you could come.' He pushes the table away to let her in.

'Good one,' she says as she plumps down on the window seat. 'Inviting me to a meal in the lions' den.'

He bares his teeth in a brief grin. 'Lions tend not to eat other lions, you know.'

She removes her gloves. He marvels at her small, narrow hands. 'You look pretty in that dress,' he says, and takes her hand.

'Let's not get carried away now,' she says under her breath. 'Lots of the present company know me and are bound to be keen to know who you are.'

He lets go of her hand. 'It's because you have such wonderful hands. Whenever I see them they remind me of graceful kittens.'

She laughs and spreads her serviette across her lap. 'Heinrich says they remind him of chickens' claws.'

He likes her laughter. In his ears it sounds like spring ice melting, he thinks, or sparkling wine. 'No manners,' Sverre says with a smile. 'You're too good for him, Vera.'

A waiter comes to their table.

Fenstad passes the menu and an impressive pile of ration tickets to the waiter. 'We'll have what we agreed on.'

Vera's eyes widen.

'And what does he say to this?' Sverre asks.

'What does who say to what?'

'What does ... Heinrich say to you being busy this evening?'

'He won't get a chance to say anything about it. There are limits.' When she laughs, like now, there is a flash of gold at the corner of her red lips. 'Joking aside. He's got other things on his mind. A new girl has started at the office. Lillemor is only nineteen. They've fallen for each other, hook, line and sinker.'

The officer at the adjacent table excuses himself to his partner and stands up to go to the toilet.

Sverre watches him.

'A krone for your thoughts, Sverre.'

'My only thoughts are on what I asked you to check out.'

'Shall we swap places,' she says.

'Fine.'

He gets up and stands with his back to the room until she has sat down. She arranges the serviette on her lap and scans the room through lowered eyelids.

'Just to be on the safe side,' she says, and adds: 'Little pitchers have long ears, as my mum used to say. I file the documents, so I've read them. Anyway I was a fly on the wall during a loud conversation.' The corner of Vera's mouth flashes again. Then she leans across the table: 'The woman was in bed when she was found. The neighbour who found her lives opposite. She had heard the child crying and thought it was strange the door was ajar. The poor mother had a child of less than twelve months. They say she was suffocated.' Vera shivers.

Sverre looks up and Vera straightens her back as the food comes to the table.

The waiter says: 'Enjoy your meal!'

Vera says she is sure she will.

The waiter withdraws. She examines her plate and looks at Sverre: 'What have we ordered?'

'French isn't my strong suit,' he says, and adds: 'But it looks good. The general mood around us suggests it'll be good.' He lowers his voice: 'Why hasn't news of this murder reached the newspapers?'

'They're still discussing how best to deal with it.' She mouths *Propaganda*.

He looks up at her.

'American cigarettes had been smoked and British sherry drunk. There was also some Scotch.'

He needs a moment or two to absorb this information, then raises his head and sends her a serious look. 'Are you sure this is Åse Lajord?'

'One hundred per cent. Her mother has come from Valdres for the formal identification.

What I'm trying to say is that certain administrators are creative as regards death and destruction.'

'Certain administrators?'

'Such as Heinrich Fehlis and Siegfried Fehmer.'

Sverre strokes Vera's forearm.

'Carry on like that and your food'll get cold,' she says with a wry grin.

'Why are the big boys interested in this case?'

'The neighbour who found the poor mother informed the police, who then searched the flat. When they found the items I mentioned they asked for assistance from the Gestapo, who are thorough. They found a gun – hidden in the fireproof wall. The neighbours thought the couple were married, but they weren't, even if the man the dead woman lived with is probably the child's father. This same man has disappeared. Now you have to eat, Sverre.'

They eat. There is a disturbance by the entrance. Vera looks up. Sverre turns and glances at the door.

A decorated German officer comes in. Several of the customers stand up and toast him with their glasses. They clap.

'Anyone you know?'

Vera shakes her head, but takes advantage of the excitement to lean over: 'Heinrich got involved in the matter because of the gun. He's ordered SS-Hauptscharführer Gustav Barschdorf to assume a so-called advisory role for the Gestapo here.'

'Because of one solitary gun?'

'There's more. The man in the flat, the one who's done a runner is a commie.'

Sverre shakes his head in despair. 'Fantasy land, Vera.'

'You can believe what you like. At any rate he was a volunteer in the Spanish Civil War. Barschdorf reckons he's a terrorist and has some connection with Asbjørn Sunde, the one they call Oswald, the terrorist who set off the bombs in the two Oslo stations in February.'

Fenstad leaned back.

'Now you've got something to chew on, eh?'

'How did they find out the man was in the International Brigade?'

'That sort of thing's in the archives.'

'Which archives?'

'We have a Minister of Police who was very interested in Norwegian communists long before Germany saved us from a British invasion.' She smiles. 'The latter was irony.'

'Do you mean he's been under surveillance?'

'Not recently.' Vera shrugs. 'But he used to be. His name's in Jonas Lie's private archives. He sailed with Wilhelmsen until October 36. Then he's supposed to have contacted a German communist agent. Afterwards he applied to join the International Brigade. And served alongside the Republicans in Spain for just over a year, but was injured during the Battle of Brunete. Then he was shipped out.'

'My impression is that Sipo are not really interested in the murder,' she says. 'They want to use the case to beat the Resistance with. They're going to announce a nationwide search for Gerhard Falkum. Which will definitely lead to arrests. Look around you. No, don't turn round. My point is that there are more than enough informers.'

Fenstad nods pensively. 'What about the child?'

'I imagine she'll be put in care.'

'Children deserve better.'

Vera smiles. 'I can see you're concerned about this girl.'

Sverre looks down. 'Someone told me the dead woman's mother lives on a smallholding in Valdres. It'd be best if the child could go there.' He raises his head. 'Could you use your influence in any way?'

Vera blinks and sends him a quizzical stare. '*Someone* told you?'

Sverre smiles back but doesn't respond.

'I can't promise you anything. Lillemor's the apple of his eye right now.'

Silence descends over them.

Vera looks up. 'What are you doing afterwards?'

'Doing? I'm here for you, Vera.'

She casts down her gaze. 'I almost believe you. You're a good actor, Sverre.'

'Actor?'

'What did Lillian say to you leaving this evening?'

'Lillian lives in the country with our child. It's for the best.'

They exchange glances and the silence speaks for them.

Vera sits up again. The newly arrived German officer has got to his feet and wants the full attention of everyone present.

Conversation subsides. Vera watches. Sverre leans back thinking about Åse Lajord's sad fate while the officer holds forth on the Führer's successes on the Eastern Front.

At last the officer raises his glass for a toast. The other officers join in.

Vera raises her glass. She and Sverre exchange glances. She tilts her head peremptorily. Duty bound, he raises his glass too.

A chair scrapes on the floor near the exit. Laughter rings out. The officer who stands up is drunk and almost topples over. Sverre watches what is going on via the mirror on the wall. The officer bursts into song.

Once again Vera and Sverre exchange glances. Vera laughs and sways from side to side in time to the rhythm.

Heute wollen wir ein Liedchen singen, trinken wollen wir den kühlen Wein ...

The song continues, and immediately more officers join in the chorus. *Wir fahren, wir fahren, ja, wir fahren ...*

The officer who started the singing raises his arms. There is a pause and the officer shouts:
Gegen Stalingrad!

The officers in the room cheer and laugh. Vera laughs along and winks at Sverre.

The singalong continues. Many more stand up. The singing reverberates around the room.
The waiters stop working and discreetly withdraw into the kitchen.

The officer at the next table signals to Fenstad and Vera: Up you get. Join in.

Vera gets up. Again she sends Sverre an admonitory look. He rolls his eyes and struggles to his feet. When the chorus comes again they link their arms and clink their glasses.

Pages 87-92

Stockholm, December 1942

The roller in the typewriter grips the paper. She turns it until there is a little white stripe visible above the keys. It is crooked. She straightens the paper and takes the cards with the names on and starts to type. At the same time she hears footsteps on the stairs and recognises them. It is Markus with the post. Ester imagines him in uniform with the Norwegian flag on his sleeve. His short hair and pointed nose, his angular body and his legs which bound up the stairs. She likes Markus. The door opens. And the first thing he says is: 'Hi, Ester.'

'Hi,' she says, looking up as her right hand hits the roller to start a new line and her fingers resume the rhythm.

'How's the typing going?' he asks from behind her.

She stops. 'I went on a course once. Anyway, it helps being able to play the piano.' She immediately regrets what she has said. Markus comes from the east end of Oslo and probably considers playing the piano snobbish. He was centre-forward for Dæhlenengen and can repeat ad nauseam the results of the 1939 AIF football championship.

A derisive comment about playing the piano failed to materialise.

'Can you read music?'

She swings round on her chair and looks at him.

He is holding out an envelope.

The handwriting is unmistakable. Ester snatches at the envelope and turns it over. No doubt about it. It has been opened.

Censorship, she thinks, and her cheeks redden. Someone already knows what her mother has written to her. They have weighed up the content and graciously allowed it through. At a pinch she can understand why people join Nasjonal Samling and why some fall for the arguments from politicians like Quisling, Irgens, Riisnæs and Meidell or whatever their names are, but opening other people's letters ... that's dirty.

She forces herself not to show her emotions. Receiving a letter is reassuring. Just holding it in your hand removes the burden from your shoulders and dampens fears that the rumours might be true. Although she still dreads opening it. She dreads bad news. That is not something you share with anyone. She wants to be alone to read. She puts down the envelope and pulls her chair to the desk so that she can continue the work she is doing.

Ester taps away at the typewriter, but she hardly knows which keys her fingers are striking. When, after a while, she looks up Markus is standing with his hands in his pockets and staring at her.

'Anything I can do for you?'

'Oh, look at him!'

Mildred appears from behind them, tickles Markus with both hands and asks him if he is allowed to have favourites in the office.

Ester grasps the opportunity, takes the envelope, wriggles past them and into the little dining room. Closes the door. Sits down. Tears open the envelope with a trembling index finger. She unfolds the sheet and checks the date. More than three weeks old. But old news is better than no news.

Dear Ester,

Friends tell me all went well with your journey. That was so good to hear. We've been worried about you. But mostly I'm happy you managed to get away. Knowing you're somewhere safe and can move around without fear, without being labelled or feeling you're worth less than others gives me some peace of mind. I'm sure you've written to us, but things are so bad now hardly any post gets through. It's safer to send messages via friends now. Here, a lot has changed for the worse. The flat and our possessions have been confiscated and we, grandma and I, have to report regularly to the police. It's humiliating, but still better than being in prison, as dad has been for three weeks. Grandma and I have spent every evening discussing what to do, weighing up the pros and cons, but we have decided to wait before following you. Grandma isn't sure she would stand the journey as it's getting colder and winter's almost upon us. Covering large distances at her age is no joke. At the moment we're living with fru Gleichmann in Tønsberg. Her husband is also under arrest. Dad and Gleichmann are both in Berg, a prison outside Oslo. Here in Tønsberg we have each other and I hope I'll soon have a chance to visit dad.

My darling daughter, you've always been a good girl, strong, proud and intelligent. It won't be long before someone gives you a job in Stockholm. I'm ...

It ends there. They have taken one of the pages!

Ester sits digesting what she has read. She is not sure whether the pressure behind her eyes is caused by the censorship or the contents of the page she has been allowed to read. The important thing is that all three of them are alive.

Eventually she gets up, looks at the mirror above the sink. Washes her face. Blows her nose. Her eyes are still red-rimmed. Nothing she can do about that. She takes a deep breath. Opens the door and walks past the other girls. Markus has left, fortunately. She looks down. Takes a seat at the desk. Someone coughs. Ester looks up.

II

Torgersen is standing in the doorway to her office. He says he has to speak to Ester. He ignores the others in the ante-room, who are all watching with interest. He coughs again. 'In private.'

Ester stands up. Follows her boss into his office.

Torgersen resumes his position behind the desk. He is the type of man who is always immaculately dressed in a dark suit with a waistcoat and a watch chain hanging over his stomach. He is his late fifties. Short hair, sensitive mouth and round rimless spectacles. The eyes behind the glass are blue and cool.

'Ester, I have to ask you if you would do a different kind of job today.'

Ester waits without speaking.

'It's an assignment. It might involve out-of-work hours.'

As if that mattered, she thinks, and says: 'That's fine. I have nothing else to do.'

'There's a Resistance man I understand you know: Gerhard Falkum.'

He looks up, curious.

Ester nods.

'Falkum has arrived at the refugee centre in Södermanland.'

Ester sinks into Torgersen's soft visitor's chair as he tells her what he has been informed by his contacts in the Swedish police. 'They – the Swedish police, that is – want to take Falkum out of the centre and interview him here in Stockholm.'

'But why?'

'He's wanted by the Norwegian police.'

'There are lots of wanted Norwegians here.'

'This is slightly different. The Oslo Police suspect him of murder.'

'What?'

'A civilian. A woman. Murdered.'

'Gerhard? I can't believe that.'

'This case is complicated, Ester. This might be a Nazi provocation. We don't know very much. Next to nothing, and it's extremely awkward because Falkum's an important figure for us. He's someone we trust.'

'But who was killed?'

'Her name's Åse Lajord.'

Ester let out a cry. 'I know Åse. Know her well. I mean I knew Åse ...' The last words are whispered.

'My condolences, Ester. I'm sorry to be the bringer of bad news, but I didn't know.'

'Of course not ...'

Ester finds it hard to believe what she is hearing and experiences the same sinking feeling she had when she read her mother's letter. She has to clench her teeth to concentrate.

'As this is a serious criminal matter, the murder of a civilian, no one can know how the Swedish authorities will react. I assume there's little to fear. But we cannot know for sure. Falkum is a highly trusted man with detailed knowledge of how the Resistance movement works in his home country. The last thing diplomats here want is a situation where extradition to Norway becomes an issue.' Torgersen leans back in his chair and closes his eyes as if searching for the right words. 'The reason I'm asking you to take this assignment is that you know Falkum. I want you to go to the refugee centre and bring him back to Stockholm before the Swedish police can react. I think I've managed to delay any moves from the police, but not by more than a day or two.'

Torgersen nervously runs his hands long the edge of the desk. 'My understanding is that Falkum is very capable. The challenge will be to get him to be a team-player.'

She nods.

'I've organised a car with a driver. Go there, use us to gain entrance. I'll sort out the practical details with the driver. We have to make an attempt and this is the best chance we have under the present circumstances.'

Ester nods again and takes a deep breath. 'When do you want me to leave?'

'Could you go now, this minute?'

She nods again.

'I've got a couple of things for you here.' He rummages around in the desk drawer and hands her a passport and a small box. God is in the details, as Gustave Flaubert once said.'

Sverre stops by the inside of the veranda door. He stands motionless for minutes on end listening, without hearing any unfamiliar noises coming from his house. He pictures the silhouette of Gerhard following him along the periphery of the Palace Gardens. What if he's waiting inside?

Gerhard must be rattled. Sverre has tackled unbalanced individuals before. But, with Gerhard, there are no holds barred. He breaks into other people's houses. Not only that, he is armed. One thing Sverre knows for certain: Gerhard is dangerous.

But he has to reduce his state of latent panic. And so he has to search his own house. First, he closes the veranda door behind him. Then he ventures in further and up the stairs.

The corridor is empty. Nothing appears to be any different. But his pulse accelerates when he opens the bedroom door. The room is empty.

The bathroom is empty.

Back downstairs. The same there. No one in the sitting room, no one in the kitchen. Everything seems untouched.

Could Gerhard have left the house with a door open? Is this his tit for tat, a threat?

Sverre stands still in front of the cellar door. In the end he opens it. At first he peers down into the darkness. Then he switches on the light. Nothing unusual as far as he can see. The staircase is steep and he has to concentrate not to fall. He stops halfway. Looks back up. The door slowly closes.

Sverre continues on down, step by step. At the bottom he switches on the next light. The neon tube flickers. It doesn't catch. He stares at the hobby room door as the light blinks. Then there is a click.

Sverre's heart stops as he tumbles against the wall.

His forehead scrapes against rough plaster. He gasps for air and his nails claw the concrete wall but nothing happens, except that the click becomes a low roar.

He grasps his chest as he realises the sound has come from the central heating boiler igniting and coming on. He breathes though an open mouth, regains his balance and stands still until his respiration is normal again. It is still painful. The central heating hums and the needle on the tank temperature gauge rises.

He takes a step forward and opens the door to the hobby room. Switches on the ceiling lamp. Nothing seems to have been moved. Leather, tools and un-stuffed animals. All the mess is intact. The dust on the floor is untouched.

He turns round. The pain in his chest has subsided as he staggers towards the staircase and goes back up. There is nothing unusual in the house. No drawers have been opened, no clocks have been stolen, none of Lillian's silverware in the sideboard has gone, nor the record player or the expensive Tandberg radio. The clock on the wall shows that it will soon be midnight.

Here, in the hallway, he stands looking at the telephone.

He flicks through the telephone directory. Finds the number for the police. Sits thinking. Changes his mind. Puts the directory back. Takes a diary from his inside pocket and finds a private number instead. Looks at the clock. It is gone midnight. It is a weekday. He deliberates. In the end he lifts the receiver and rings the Hotel Continental number. He asks for Gary Larson. The receptionist puts him through. The phone rings for a long time. No reply.

He cradles the receiver. 'Oh, Gerhard, Gerhard,' he mumbles, then gets up and goes to the bar. Opens it. Pours himself a drink from the bottle he offered Gerhard a few days ago. Drains his glass in a single draught. Puts down the glass and goes to the bathroom.

Afterwards he tries the telephone again. Rings Hotel Continental. He is transferred to Gary Larson's room. No one answers this time either. He stands there holding the receiver. The phone

rings repeatedly. He considers whether there is any reason to be concerned, not knowing where Gerhard is. Concludes by telling himself that Gerhard has been here. To frighten him. As a kind of revenge for his visit to Gerhard's hotel room. An eye for an eye. Presumably Gerhard is on his way back to the hotel now. Or he is intentionally not answering the phone because he realises it is Sverre ringing.

Sverre examines the house one last time and checks that all the doors are locked. The front door, the veranda door. Now that he is positive he is alone it is no problem going down to the cellar and checking the entrance there. The woodwork has been damaged. This is where Gerhard broke in, perhaps with the help of a jemmy or some such tool. He forced the frame out. It won't happen again. The door has two locks: a standard one and a metal fitting on the inside which can be used to secure the entrance with a padlock. He goes into the hobby room and locates the padlock in a drawer. Clicks it in place. Now the next attempt won't be so easy. He checks the windows are properly secure. He stops by the telephone and lifts the receiver off the cradle. Puts it on the table. The sound of the dialling tone follows him up the stairs.

He undresses to go to bed. Opens the bedroom window a fraction. Changes his mind and closes it. Once again he makes sure the window is closed before crawling under the duvet.

II

A shadow leans over the bed. A figure with a balaclava over his head. Sverre tries to raise his hand and push the figure away, but fails. He wants to tear off the balaclava, but still can't move his hand. Sverre realises he is dreaming. At that moment, the figure disappears and Sverre feels cold. The chill in the room has forced him out of his slumbers.

He wakes up with a start.

The window is ajar.

Sverre is immediately wide awake and tries to breathe evenly. He lies still listening. It is raining outside. A branch brushes against the pane. He carefully turns his head. The darkness in the corridor outside his bedroom is a black wall. The bedroom door is open.

Someone has opened his bedroom door. Someone has been here and opened the window while he was asleep.

Now Sverre can hear a strange buzzing sound beneath the rain and the wind, it comes from inside the house, from the floor below.

He tries to slip out of bed without rustling the duvet and sheet. Places his feet on the floor. The pain in his hip hits him as he stands up.

He teeters, but stays on his feet. The floorboards creak as he walks to the wall. He casts a glance over his shoulder as his hand gropes for the window. Grabs it. Closes the window. Limpes over to the door. Gazes into the dark corridor outside his bedroom. Stands listening. Silence – apart from the eerie noise from the ground floor.

What is Gerhard after?

Sverre goes back to the bed. Opens the drawer in his bedside table. Where he keeps a dagger. He takes it and heads for the dark corridor. Walks hugging the wall, his dagger raised, until he reaches the stairs.

His mouth is dry. His arms and legs are weak.

He stops at the top of the stairs. Down below, at the foot of the staircase, light is coming in – through an open door.

Someone has switched on the light. Someone is still here.

He wants to shout, but his voice won't carry. He is sweating and his dagger hand is trembling.

But he doesn't want to be left in this position. He needs certainty. Has to know what is going on.

He forces himself down the stairs. One hand on the banister. The other holding the raised weapon.

The buzzing is louder with every step.

Before he reaches the end he sees the receiver is back on the cradle.

He stops on the last step, his hand squeezing the banister as he stares at the telephone. The light from the sitting room falls on it.

Slowly he turns his head to the right.

The sitting-room door is ajar. That is where the buzzing is coming from.

He continues to the door and pushes it open with the dagger.

No one there, but the television is on. There is snow on the screen. Noise. He goes in.

Switches off the television. Total silence.

There is a light in the kitchen. The door is open.

He tiptoes towards the door. The door hinges scream.

On the kitchen table there is a half-drunk cup of coffee.

On the stove is the kettle. He places a hand against it. It is still warm.

While he is feeling the kettle the telephone rings. He turns. Walks into the hallway and lifts the receiver. 'Hello, Sverre Fenstad here.'

No answer.

'Hello?' he repeats.

A click tells him the connection has been broken.

He replaces the receiver and goes to the sitting-room door. There he sees the silhouette of a person on the television screen and his knees give way. He clutches his chest.

But the movements on the screen tell him this pathetic shadow of a man is himself. He leans against the door frame for support. Afterwards he limps into the sitting room and sits on the chair in the corner. Here he has a better overview than in bed upstairs.

He tells himself he has to search the house, yet knows it is unnecessary. The person who has been here has gone. However, Sverre knows he will have to strike back. He has to register a protest. He has to make Gerhard understand that this time he has gone too far.

Actually, there is only one thing he can do: call Brustad early tomorrow morning.

He sits rapt in thought. Could Brustad have met Gerhard during the war? Of course it is a possibility, but not necessarily the case. He thinks he can remember that Brustad was in Oslo through 1941. Afterwards Brustad was briefly at the Justice Office in Sweden before moving onto London where he worked in Intelligence as a security officer. Sverre doesn't believe Brustad knew Gerhard Falkum. Sverre doesn't have to tell the security service boss the whole story. So it is of no importance. Brustad never does the dirty work himself.

Sverre lifts his hand. It is still shaking. All the doors and windows were closed when he went to bed. How did Gerhard get in?

Sverre leans back in his chair and surveys his home. When it is day, he thinks, when daylight returns, his composure will also return, and then I will be able to put this experience behind me.

Oslo, November 1967

Ester watches Gerhard as she comes down the steps. She stops on the final step. Keeping her hands in her pockets.

He doesn't turn away.

He knows I am here, she thinks, and walks nearer. She comes to a halt by the bench.

He looks up at her without speaking. Then he puts a hand in the bag and offers her a bread roll.

She takes it. The ducks waddle around their feet. Ester leans against the railing and tears pieces off the roll. Throws chunks to the ducks.

'You haven't changed much,' he says.

'Nor you.'

'Perhaps not on the outside.'

Now he focusses on her and says: 'You never know what's in people's heads.'

She doesn't answer.

'If things had been different,' Gerhard says. 'Could you picture it? Me sitting with a newspaper on my lap and my weary limbs on a pouf. Father of an adult daughter, a good job in Einar Gerhardsen's Norway and a photo album full of happy memories.'

She throws the last bit of the bread. A mallard with a splendid, shiny green head stuck out its beak and gobbles it down. Ester brushes the crumbs off her hands. 'Per Borten's Norway.'

She instantly regrets her fierce comment and tone. 'Sorry,' she says, and looks at him until he raises his head and meets her eyes. 'So you don't have any children in your new life?'

He continues to look at her in silence.

'I presume that's a no,' she says.

'I could have been with my father for the last years of his life. I don't know when he died and I don't know where he's buried.'

It goes through her mind that she doesn't know either, but says nothing.

'I was a little surprised to see you up there,' he says. 'You said you would never return to Norway, not after what had happened to your family.'

'I waited a long time.'

Gerhard looks straight ahead.

'In that sense we have quite a bit in common, Gerhard.'

'In that sense?'

'The times, waiting, ambivalence.'

The ducks have lost interest in them. The last ones swim away, their yellow feet paddling frenetically beneath the water.

Gerhard straightens up. 'Why did you follow me here?'

'I was unsure.'

'About what?'

'Whether I wanted the conversation we still haven't had.'

'What would you and I have to talk about, Ester?'

She smiles to herself. 'Yes, what would we have to talk about?'

'Give me a suggestion,' he says in such a curt, dismissive way she has to look at him again.

She answers: '1942, for example.'

'Stockholm?'

'Yes, Stockholm,' she says, at first somewhat confused, then irritated. 'Or what happened here in Oslo. We were infiltrated.'

He gazes at her silently. Waiting for elucidation.

'I was seconds away from being arrested. Literally. The day after you left Åse and me in Herman Foss' gate.'

She pauses.

'Is that all? You were almost arrested?'

She doesn't answer.

'Why do you say that?'

Because I'm beating about the bush, she thinks, but says nothing.

'I've spoken to you many times, Ester, in my mind, and do you know what we talked about?'

She shakes her head.

'I've asked you a question: Why were you ready to sell me down the swanee on that December day in Stockholm?'

'My version of events is slightly different,' she says.

'Ester. It was a set-up. You know that. I know that. And what else do we know? Gerhard Falkum was a problem. It could have been solved in a variety of ways. But you and the others tried to solve the problem the dirty way.'

'Me?'

'Don't tell me you're still insisting it was a de-briefing session that was intended that evening.'

'You can make up your own mind. Perhaps it was a set-up. You know more about that than me. But one person died. Well, it wasn't you. So who was it – and where did you get to afterwards?'

He stretches out his legs and puts his hands between his thighs, uncommunicative.

'Who was waiting for you there, for us?'

He sits as still as before, staring into the distance.

'Have you forgotten that there were two of us?'

He is as uncommunicative as before.

'The war's over, Gerhard.'

His condescending smile turns into a contemptuous grin.

'What is important now is trust.'

'Trust? Now? Unlike then?'

She doesn't answer.

'Do you remember you wanted me to make a deal, but you didn't know who I was meeting?'

She suddenly becomes irritated again: 'What do you imagine would have happened if I'd been with you? Do you think I'd have waited by the fence while you were being gunned down?'

She has eye contact again. 'This is not the conversation I want with you,' she says.

'Start by being honest,' he says.

'Honest?'

'Listen to yourself! Should the nice little Jewish girl in communications be sacrificed? Who do you think you're talking to?'

I don't know, she thinks. Actually I don't. She tries to get eye contact again. 'I'm talking to the only man who knows what happened. One person died. Who was it? Why did he die?'

'That's what you want to know after all these years?'

'Do you think that's strange?'

He sends her an odd look.

'What's the matter?'

'You believe all the clichés, don't you.'

She doesn't understand where he is going with this. 'Clichés?'

He rolls his eyes skywards. 'Then it was war – now it's peace, with the Iron Curtain between the East and the West. And behind the barricades is our Ester with her trust and loyalty, her allegiance to her country and the claptrap about freedom from tyranny.'

She eyes him with puzzlement, trying to understand the meaning behind these words.

'I tried to find security in your face the day you knelt before me begging me to fetch you by taxi. I had waited a while and was curious to find out who got the Judas assignment. It was hard to accept it was you. Well, I might have guessed they would try. But that you agreed to the assignment was tough to take.'

'Judas?'

'He might be a New Testament character, but I believe you know what he stands for.'

'When you start thinking like that there is no end to it, Gerhard.'

'Do yourself a favour and shut up. When you were sitting in front of me on the floor in Sirena I wasn't in Stockholm any more. I was back in Brunete in 37. You see only one thing when you've got a bullet in your body and you're bleeding to death. You see you came into this world *alone*. You live in this world *alone* and you'll die in it *alone*. Perhaps you think you're different, but you weren't then. You went around alone then, Ester. You didn't give a damn about me. You didn't give a damn about my child. You carried out your assignment without a thought for any consequences.'

Ester looks down. When she raises her head her voice is barely audible. 'There were many of us who had to make sacrifices in those years, Gerhard.'

The chill smile lurks at the corner of his mouth. 'Isn't it time to play the Jewish card? Come on. See if it works.'

She swallows and is quiet.

'I can play along now and go back to Start,' he says. 'Let's do that, just for the sake of it. You know as well as I do my hell started when Åse's heart stopped beating. So the question is simple: Who would Åse have opened the door to, who would she have let in, who would she have had a drink with – apart from you and me?'

Ester looks away. She has no answer to these questions, which she has also asked herself countless times.

'The world is different now,' she says at length. 'You are different. We're different.'

'Really?' Gerhard gets to his feet and stands directly in front of her. 'Imagine me hearing you say that! The representative of a people who have sought revenge every single day since peace came. What did you say in May when Israel occupied East Jerusalem and the West Bank of the River Jordan?'

'It may have been wrong of Israel to do that, but the fact is that the war started because Egypt blocked the entrance to the Gulf of Eilat and wanted to starve us out.'

He grins. 'Us? Aren't you a Norwegian? Can't you distinguish between individuals and causes?'

'I have a son who risked his life in that war.' Ester can feel she is tired of this conversation. 'If you want to talk Middle Eastern politics, Sverre Fenstad's your man. He's the board member of The Israel Committee of Norway. But since you ask: I discovered in Norway what it means to be Jewish and that experience will never leave me. I don't give a damn what you or any others think about that.'

'And I'm under no illusions that you will understand this, Ester, and I don't give a shit whether you do or don't because I've waited for more than twenty years.'

'What have you waited for?'

Now finally he reveals the smile she remembers. But she sees it with resignation in her heart because it is a smile filled with disdain. His smile has always been like this, she thinks. I just hadn't noticed until now, she thinks, as he turns his back on her and ascends the steps to the bridge.

She watches him. When he is halfway up she calls out: 'Gerhard!'

He stops and turns.

'You've spent all these years thinking, haven't you?'

'So?'

'I didn't come here to find out who died on that Friday,' she says. 'I wanted to meet you to find out what had happened to you and why things finished between us. I know you're bitter and don't want to close the gap between us. That's up to you. But I could never understand how the remains they found could be you. For me you've always been alive.'

He regards her with the same chill expression. Throws his arms into the air as if he is on the stage. 'And how does what you see tally with what you've imagined all these years?'

She sighs and stares at her shoes. Searches for the right words, but says them inside her head: pretty badly right now.

She turns away from him, leans against the railings and watches the ducks swimming around in the water below.

The sound of footsteps tells her he has left.