

Anders Bortne

The Year of the Wolf

a Novel

A SAMPLE

Originally published by Tiden Norsk Forlag 2017
as “Ulvens år”

©2017 Translated by Becky L. Crook

Rights handled by
Northern Stories
Arbins gate 1, 0253 Oslo
thomas@northernstories.no
Mob: +47 46676155
www.northernstories.no

He awoke from the sound of a child crying in the courtyard. Stayed in bed listening to the child and mother, her words were foreign — Arabic he guessed — but her voice was soothing. He looked at the curtains and the light cutting through them, wondered if the window had been open all night or whether Jannike had opened it before she left for work.

The door to Sara's room stood slightly open. The room had not been used in the last three weeks. The bed had been made up, the books placed on the shelf, stuffed animals lined up in a row on the bed, clothes folded and stacked on the dresser. He was the one who cleaned up after his daughter. Jannike always asked him for permission before tidying up in here.

He returned a few of the books to the floor, took out a t-shirt and pair of jeans and tossed them across the bed. Then he stood back in the doorway and surveyed the room once more. Better.

With windows down, he drove through the city and up the hills. He parked on a slope above a row of rust coloured wooden houses and pulled on the handbrake. From this vantage point he could see the city and the fjord, glass and water glittering beneath the blue haze of the sky. It was going to be another hot day. He was early, and stayed seated in the car. A young man pushed a stroller down the hill, his back arched, letting the gravity pull him forward. Daniel opened the door. It smelled like pine needles and oil. He walked toward the first row of houses, hoping he would not run into any of the old neighbours.

Funny seeing you in these parts. Here to pick up Sara?

Yep.

Summer break with Dad?

Yep.

How old is she now?

Eleven.

Eleven years old. Time flies.

Håvard opened the door. Wearing a training jersey, one entire head taller. That black, curly hair of his sticking out every which way.

Oh. Hi, Daniel.

I'm a bit early.

No problem. Come on in.

Coats bulged from the walls, shoes floated on the floor surface, the small baskets hanging from the walls were heaped with hats, mittens, gloves, rain jackets, scarves, baseball caps, neck warmers. Every season was represented. He heard Ragnhild's voice from upstairs.

Is that Daniel that just came in?

He didn't take off his shoes. Last time he had gone up in his socks and hated the feeling. It was always him who did the picking up and dropping off. Except for last time, before the break when Ragnhild had happened to be in the city near his flat and had up called their daughter directly, not him, not like they had agreed. And then suddenly Sara had been standing there in the entryway with her jacket and backpack on, looking at him like she'd been caught red-handed.

The upstairs floor was covered with bags and suitcases, all of them open and filled with clothes, shoes, books, toys and toiletries. Tobias sat in a highchair in front of the big screen, which was playing *Spiderman*. A blob of pureed fruit on his cheek. The child gave Daniel a puzzled stare as he walked into the living room.

Ragnhild's hair was wet. A towel dangled over her shoulder and she was wearing pyjama bottoms and a large, white T-shirt. She dripped onto his shirt as she gave him a hug. Pulling back, she noticed the wet spot.

Oops, sorry.

It's okay.

Ragnhild went into the kitchen. Daniel followed.

I don't know if she's even up yet. You'd like some coffee, right?

Two plates with leftover egg yolks were still on the table. Newspapers, tablets, and mobile phones littered the concluded mealtime.

Ragnhild handed Daniel a mug of coffee. The ceramic featured a red heart and the words *World's Best Mom*. They walked back into the living room. She sat on an arm rests, tilted her head and began to dry her hair with the towel.

We got back from Lykkebu last night, so we're all a little tired.

How is Trond?

Fine. He says hello.

And the farm?

The farm is there. And both of you? Are you starting your holidays yet?

Mine started on Monday. Jannike's last day is today.

When are you leaving?

Tomorrow.

Oh, I love Denmark.

For as long as they shared custody of Sara, their lives would have to be drawn up in parallel. Vacation plans, birthday gifts and celebrations were arranged side by side. There was no way around it. The only thing they could do was to praise each other's lives.

Daniel stood and began walking around, letting his gaze glide across the objects in the room, some familiar, others unfamiliar. At one time, a long time ago, this had been his home as well. Now the wall between the kitchen and living room had been removed, all of the furniture replaced with new pieces. He paused at the bookshelf in front of one of the stones.

Axe?

Seven thousand years old.

He was used to Ragnhild's stones and bits of bronze and iron that she brought home from various excavations. He had learned how to identify the different shapes, what they had once comprised, what function they'd once had, which era they were from. A piece of a sword from the early Bronze Age, an arrowhead from the Stone Age. All that human hands created had at one point been fashioned from nothing. It fascinated him. Daniel held the oblong, dark

stone in his hand. Blunt and narrow at one end, flatter and wider at the other. A little smaller than a mobile phone.

Used for felling trees?

Well, agriculture maybe. Or protection.

From what?

Other people. Predators.

There was a noise through the door. He sat down. Sara appeared in the doorway. Leaned against the wall, lifted one foot and propped it against the other. Her feet were bare, she was wearing a yellow summer dress, a dark headband pushed her hair back away from her open face. She still had sleep in her eyes.

Hi.

Hello, my love.

Ragnhild looped the towel around her neck and gave Sara a nod in Daniel's direction.

Aren't you going to hug your dad?

The sound of naked feet across the floor, she stopped behind him, her bare arms found each other across his chest. He could feel her warmth.

Are you packed? asked her mother.

Sara straightened up, her shoulders sank. A desperation in her voice that she only used with her mother.

But I just got back *last night*.

Daniel stood.

I can come back later.

Her mother tossed her hair, he could see her considering the idea for a moment.

No. A deal is a deal. Sara, you go pack your things in five minutes. It doesn't matter if your clothes are clean or dirty. You can do laundry tonight. Right, Daniel? There's a long line for the laundry here as it is.

Daniel nodded.

We can wash your clothes when we get to the flat.

He avoided using the word *home* whenever he came to pick her up. On the way from one place to the other, the word lost its meaning.

Sara didn't respond. She was still stuck in her life here: her mother's admonition, the dirty clothes, the bag she had to pack. In only a little while it would just be Sara and her father.

I'll go pack. But it's going to take awhile.

Their daughter walked to her bedroom door, her steps were heavy, head hung. Ragnhild cleared away the plates and glasses.

I think she's sad about Julie. They're not friends anymore.

Again?

Now Julie isn't going to go with her to the cabin.

But there were other girls . . .

Vigdis. And Vigdis's mom. It's their cabin. But Vigdis is Julie's friend, not Sara's. I don't know what happened, I don't think Sara even knows. Can you talk to her about it?

Before he could answer he heard a noise from the highchair, something that sounded like vomiting. Ragnhild had gathered up the iPads, magazines and newspapers and now she dropped them like a fan across the table and ran to Tobias. They were both over him in a second, Ragnhild lifted him from the chair and held his body in front of her.

Tobias gave another small hacking cough, his small fists were clenched below his mouth, the fingers covered by something resembling smushed apple. His eyes were red, his mouth open. Then he smiled. Daniel took a step back.

Did it get stuck in his throat?

Ragnhild put Tobias over her shoulder and turned away from Daniel as though she wanted to take control of the situation on her own.

Sara came out of the bedroom and stood in the doorway, a garment sweeping the floor in each hand.

Mama, where's my *swimsuit*?

Look in the bag that's hanging in the entryway. I packed it this morning. Tobias and I are going swimming later.

Daniel stood and walked to the stairs.

I'm going outside for a bit.

Sure, go ahead," said Ragnhild. "She'll be ready soon.

He sat in a garden chair near the sandbox. The veranda door was open and he heard the mother and daughter talking. The low adult voice, barely audible, and the child's brimming with emotion and movement.

Two boys came out of a house further down the row, they were Sara's age, and walked with long, quick steps, they knew where they were going. They passed him as they talked breathlessly together.

You can sit on the other side of the world and fly and shoot.

But how do you know that you've hit it? I mean, for real?

Daniel stood up. He didn't want to be seen like this, reclining in a chair in front of a house he no longer lived in. He walked to the small garden in front of the house. At the point where the grass ended was a little slope that angled down to the next row of houses. The slope was covered with bark. It was here that he had started a vegetable garden in the year that Sara was born, sewed carrots, radishes, turnips and herbs. He had only cajoled a few plants to grow that first season, the selection had diminished each year. By the time he moved out there was only parsley and weeds growing here. Now that was gone too.

It was Ragnhild's house, so when they made their decision eight years ago, he was the one to move out. He took the leather sofa that had been beneath the stairs, a glass coffee table, the old dining room furniture. Things they had been discussing getting rid of for a long time would now have to do until he found something else. Ragnhild had burst out laughing when she first saw his new place, the ill-placed, outdated furniture. That had been the first laughter in a long time. "It definitely looks like a new divorce here," she said.

The rest had been divided up in a friendly way: he got the record player; she got the TV. He got the crystal glasses, she got the porcelain. Everything could be divided and then forgotten. Everything except Sara.

Daniel bent down, picked up a flat stone and dug in the bark, found the soil underneath, moist and already warm in the morning sun. Soil and stone, nothing else.

Hello?

She stood at the other end of the garden with a large bag over her shoulder, a book under her arm. She had on the same yellow dress, had pulled her hair up into a ponytail, her denim jacket hung loosely across her shoulders. Green tennis shoes on her feet. Now she gazed at him with the embarrassed and bewildered look on her face, the one she got whenever she didn't understand what he was doing. That gaze that accepted everything about him, he almost never saw

that one anymore. A new expression had begun to surface recently, he knew it was going to settle permanently onto her face. *Exactly what are you doing?*

Are you ready?

Daniel clapped his hands together to brush away the soil, stepped out of the former vegetable garden. Ragnhild came out onto the terrace above them and leaned over the rail.

She has a bag of laundry with her.

Okay.

Have a good trip. Love you, Sara.

Love you, Mum.

And Daniel?

He stopped, turned.

Seatbelt.

As he started the ignition, the radio came on, the sound of a press conference, a female voice speaking slowly and exaggeratedly. Reliable sources, she said. He switched it off. They sat for awhile in the car cabin's confined but pleasant encapsulation. Finally just the two of them. He could feel the relief, but also wished that everything could be different. He wanted to hold her.

Wait a little while longer.

Sara turned halfway toward him and looked at her father before locating her seatbelt and pulling it across her chest to fasten at the hip. Then she leaned her elbow on the car door and rested her head in her hand.

I'm not sad, she said. Just tired.

They started down the slopes toward the city center. The sky appeared larger up here on the hills, the sea was like a big mirror, half hidden behind the tall buildings.

Are you looking forward to the trip tomorrow? he said.

Sara nodded.

Today we are going to take it easy. You and I.

Ok.

First we'll eat breakfast. Then we'll visit grandpa and then I thought that we could head to the swimming pool. And later we'll meet up with Jannike and eat out.

We have to do my laundry.

We can do that tonight. I'll put them in the dryer and they'll be ready before we leave tomorrow. Ok?

He stopped at the red light, letting two girls cross the road on bicycles.

Dad?

It had been awhile since he'd last heard that word. For a few seconds there was nothing but a dead noise, like a dried up creek bed before new water began to flow.

You don't have to make plans for us, you know.

What do you mean?

Mum never makes plans when we're together. We just do what we do.

The light turned green and Daniel put the car into motion again. He thought about those two plates with bits of uneaten eggs at Ragnhild's place. The adults had eaten without Sara, probably without even thinking about it, Sara could sleep for as long as she liked, Sara could get her own breakfast whenever she woke up. Because they all lived together, they were a family. He and Jannike couldn't eat breakfast on their own whenever his daughter was staying with them. Every meal had to be planned, shared, made special. He knew that Jannike felt like a failure if she passed up any opportunity to be together with Sara, she felt that she was failing Daniel, Sara and Ragnhild, and the entire fragile house of cards that he had built up around himself and the people he loved.

He turned off of the road and pulled up in front of the mini mart kiosk.

Why are we stopping?

Sara stretched out her neck, as though looking for the answer outside.

Getting some ice cream.

No?

Does *everything* have to be planned?

Sara smiled.

But I haven't even eaten breakfast.

We'll eat breakfast afterwards. But first I want ice cream.

Sara pulled her hair back, hesitantly. He opened the door and put a foot out onto the street. Sara remained seated.

You don't want to come inside?

I'll stay here.

What kind of ice cream do you want?

You can choose.

He left the motor and air conditioner on. Outside of the kiosk, the two girls sat on white plastic chairs, each

with a mobile phone in their hands, their bikes tossed on top of each other on the grass in front of them. On the newsstand near the door he could see the day's headlines: large, yellow sunshines wearing painted smiles and sunglasses. So the nice weather would continue. Further down the page was a photo of people on a beach. A sailboat carrying forty refugees had capsized off the coast of Crete, thirteen people were still missing. Children surrounded by adults. White sand, blue sea. They could have been tourists on the beach, he thought, if one didn't pay attention to their clothes and shoes.

A big man with a baseball cap stood behind the counter, a TV was attached to the wall above his head. The sound was off, it showed images from a bicycle race, and at the bottom of the screen the news headlines written in white rolled across a black stripe. Daniel could feel the dry chill of the ice cream counter on his face as his gaze slid over the cardboard boxes of ice cream cones and pops, he grabbed one vanilla and one soft ice cream cone. Lay the ice cream on the counter, slid his card and tapped in his pin.

As he pushed open the door and felt the heat from outside, his phone rang. It was Jannike.

Did you pick her up?

Daniel stopped in the shade of the kiosk. He could see the contours of his daughter sitting in the passenger seat of the car.

Yes. She was asleep when I got there.

Oh.

He could hear it each time Jannike was unsure how to react to what he said about his daughter, as though having children was a puzzle she didn't dare solve.

We brought her dirty laundry with us. I'll put in a load when we get home this evening.

What are you going to do now?

I'm standing here holding two ice cream cones.

Jealous.

We're going to eat breakfast somewhere.

You've heard about the threat, haven't you?

The threat?

There was just a press conference. Police forces have stepped up preparedness nationwide.

Why?

They didn't know. Or, they didn't say. They received a threat, they didn't say more than that. Just asked people to be on guard.

On guard against what?

You should read about it yourself. It's in the news everywhere.

Are you feeling okay?

A little nauseous. But that will pass. There's nothing *wrong* with me, Daniel.

I just want to be sure.

You didn't say anything to Sara?

No.

Let's wait to do that. Until we're sure. Is that okay?

But we are sure.

So much could happen though. Promise?

Alright. See you tonight.

I love you.

I love you.

The chairs outside the kiosk were empty, the two girls had disappeared. The asphalt was covered by white spots of trodden chewing gum. Daniel touched his shoulder, the wet spot from Ragnhild's hair had dried.

The previous evening, Jannike had come out of the bathroom, stood in the doorway, in her underwear, and he understood that there was something she wanted to say. They had been together for six years, they'd been trying for one year to get pregnant.

Yes?

Yes.

She had started crying.

The next morning, Sara was the first thing he thought about. How would she react?

He handed the vanilla ice cream cone to his daughter in the sweltering car. She sat up and took it.

Would you prefer the soft ice cream? I bought both so you could choose.

Sara tore off the paper.

I like this one.

He put the ice cream between his lips, could feel the flesh sticking to the frost, began to drive. Sara had switched on the radio again. One of the regular news commentators was talking. It's clear that the situation would have to be thoroughly weighed before the police would decide to do something like that, the voice said. Daniel switched it off.

Sara looked at him.

Your ice cream is melting, he said. Eat.

The last time he'd picked Sara up, they had listened to the news story about the American aid worker who had been decapitated. A video of the act had been posted online, the newscaster described the video and used the words *before they used a knife to cut off the American's head*. Daniel almost couldn't believe his ears. When he had turned it off, he hadn't been sure whether it was for his sake or his daughter's. He had quickly asked Sara questions about her gymnastics, about school, about anything. She had responded, apparently unmoved. Had she heard what had been said? Had she understood it?

Now she looked at him.

Why did you turn off the radio?

I can turn it on again. Do you want me to?

Sara put the ice cream in her mouth and pulled it out again through closed lips. A piece of hard chocolate came off, gleaming with spit. Daniel took a bite of the soft ice cream, it stuck to the back of his teeth before he swallowed.

Tell me about your vacation with Mom, he said.

Why?

Why — I'm just trying to have a conversation with you.

We were at the farm.

Drying hay?

Yes. And painted a little.

The barn?

The storehouse.

How are your grandma and grandpa doing?

She didn't answer.

Sara?

They're fine.

Who else was there?

Uncle Thomas and Aunt Siv.

And the boys?

Yes.

How is Simen's band doing?

Don't know.

What else did you do then?

Read.

Read what?

Books.

They passed the cemetery and school yards, stopped at read at the second Ring Road. At the large roundabout, surrounded by outdoor cafes, he veered east, crossed the river and then headed south, found an empty parking spot in a back street with scaffolding on the buildings along both sides. The heat hit them as they opened the doors.

What a day, he said.

Sara looked at him, her eyes opened, preparing herself for anything.

What do you mean?

It's so hot.

Oh, yeah.

He walked to the park and pay machine, paid and put the ticket on the dash. Quickly, as he was used to now after so many years of having a child that is waiting for him. Sara had already started walking, as though she knew where they were going.

Sara.

She stopped.

Where are you going?

Where we went last time?

Ok.

Isn't that where we're going?

We could if you want.

Wasn't that the plan?

Me? I don't make plans.

Ha-ha, she said.

They moved along the quiet back streets toward the main street and the narrow sidewalks where the tram thundered past. Outside the cafe they bumped into one of Daniel's friends who told them he was on his way to the

airport to pick up his sister and her family.

I was going to meet them in the city, he said. But after the police press conference I had to promise to come meet them once they landed. Hi, Sara, how's it going?

Good.

Were you on vacation with your dad? You're so tan.

We're leaving tomorrow, said Daniel. Denmark. Rented a house.

On the other side of the street Daniel saw the park, the water fountains, the dogs sticking their noses in the water, the kids lying in the shadows below the trees. His friend looked at his phone.

So I had to promise to meet them there, otherwise she refused to get on the plane, he repeated.

Are the planes going like normal?

Oh yes. Everything is like normal. The only thing they accomplish by doing that is to scare people from going out. Did you watch the press conference? The Justice Minister and all these police chiefs lined up, but they didn't have anything to say. Only that they had *received a threat* — he made air quotes with his fingers. Of course people are going to be frightened.

They found an empty table at the window, Sara ordered a caesar salad and a coke, he an omelette and a cup of coffee. He took off his sunglasses and tossed them on the table.

Coke for breakfast?

I ate an ice cream too.

But you don't want more than a salad? Eggs are good.

I don't like eggs.

What? You eat eggs.

No, I don't.

When did you stop doing that?

Sara put her hair behind her ears and looked outside, a stripe of sunlight fell onto her high forehead, nose and her full but not yet fully developed lips. She took out her mobile phone and looked at it quickly before setting it down on the table — as though waiting for him to ask her to put it away. Daniel slid a hand over his pockets in search of his own phone, but he must have left it in the car. He should find out more about this press conference, read more about the threat himself. A threat. What was that all about? The police forces stepped up their preparedness nationwide, Jannike had said, but he hadn't seen anything to that end yet. The airplanes were all running as usual, everything seemed normal.

Sara looked at him.

What are you looking for?

Nothing.

Was that a friend of yours? The guy we met outside?

You've met him before.

I have? When?

Don't remember.

Is he a good friend?

Yes.

Your best friend?

Daniel met his daughter's piercing brown gaze. A little while ago, in the car, he had to drag the words out of her, now she was the one demanding to know answers. For the first hours after he usually picked her up, he tended to be extra attentive. Why was she so quiet? Why did she talk so much? He knew that he couldn't give into this sensitivity. It wasn't natural. Soon they would take it all for granted again, they would go through the day without worrying or wondering about what the other person said or did. And it would be in this carelessness that they would find each other again.

I don't have best friends, said Daniel. I have good friends, and then I have friends.

Did you know him before I was born?

Yes. I even knew him before I was together with your mother.

Do you spend a lot of time together?

We call each other every now and then.

What do you talk about?

About things we're busy with. About our kids.

Why don't you hang out?

You are certainly curious.

Sara leaned back and crossed her arms, he could see her expression closing as if she was shutting a gate.

We hang out, Daniel said quickly. But not as much as we used to.

Sitting at the table next to them was what seemed to be a family of three. Father and son were thin and dark with bird-like faces, large pointed noses and sorrowful, questioning eyes. The mother, grey-haired and plump had looked at Sara several times. Now she leaned over toward them.

What a beautiful girl you have.

Daniel nodded and smiled back.

Thank you.

This was something Daniel had discovered when he became a father: some people couldn't hold back when they saw a child. Sara didn't receive as much attention now as she used to, but a few years ago it had seemed as though the world circled came to a halt in her presence.

The soda and coffee arrived at the table along with cutlery and napkins. Sara drank greedily, when she lowered her glass she was out of breath, her eyes were wet and red from the fresh carbon dioxide.

Take it easy.

Yeah, yeah.

For a minute she was a child again, his child. The gate lifted, a gap. Daniel leaned across the table.

What were you reading? On your vacation?

Books, I told you.

But which books?

A series. I'm almost done with the second book. I borrowed them from Julie.

Julie. How are things going with her?

Sara stopped as though realizing she'd suddenly divulged a secret. Her gaze shifted to the side and out the window.

Sara?

Why are you asking about that?

Is that so strange? You're best friends, right?

She looked at him again.

I don't have best friends either.

Sara pressed her lips together, a sign that he would come no further on this path. Daniel leaned back and took a sip of coffee, a thick, bitter warmth filled his mouth. He had often discussed Julie with Ragnhild over the past six months. Julie was not good for Sara. Julie made Sara feel bad. There was little that parents could do. And maybe the relationship with Julie was one way to prepare their daughter for what would come in the future, he had thought several times. Sara would have to learn to protect herself from all of the thoughtless people she would meet later in life.

Daniel opened a packet of sugar and emptied it into his coffee, stirred. He did it slowly and thoroughly, as though he wanted to divert his daughter's attention from the question he was about to ask.

Are you and Julie no longer best friends?

Did you want to hear about the book or not?

She gave him that childish, demonstrative look that always made him smile. Daniel nodded.

Yes. I really want to hear about the book. What's it about?

A country.

Which country?

In another world? It's called Wy.

Wy.

The sound of sirens wailed outside. The two waiters stopped. The whining noise came closer and passed just outside, like a smack of air just barely brushing your ear. Sara leaned toward the window, a young woman at the other end of the restaurant stood halfway up and peered outside. The rest of the table began to laugh. The foreign family looked at Daniel, confused. He shrugged, smiled, and shook his head, as though to say *I don't know, but it's probably nothing*. The family smiled back, calmed down.

Sara grabbed the bottle again, Daniel waited until she was finished drinking. He was impatient, wanted to know if she had seen anything, but didn't want to appear anxious. He hadn't seen the car, but judging by the noise, it had passed by just outside the window.

Did you see it? The car?

There were two.

Two cars? Police?

Mm-hm.

The food was placed before them, Daniel began to eat. Sara picked up a crouton and turned it in her fingertips as if studying it.

What does preparedness mean?

Preparedness? It means to be ready.

Ready?

Do you remember when you were in girl scouts?

Yes?

Be prepared. Preparedness is to be prepared.

For what?

For what is going to come?

Everything that is going to come?

For the things that you normally don't expect. For special things. And dangerous things.

Oh.

Why are you asking about that?

They said it on the radio.

When?

When you went to buy the ice cream.

They said that on the radio? What did they say?

That there was a threat, and that the police were in emergency preparedness.

Daniel set down his fork and looked around the cafe. The family of three stood, the mother nodded in farewell before they walked in a row between the tables and out into the sun. The waiter cleared away the plates and silverware. Outside the window, a young woman with a tiny dog passed, the dog had a red handkerchief around its neck. Daniel again passed his hands over his jeans pockets. His mobile phone, he needed it. He needed to know what it was that everyone else knew.

There's nothing to be afraid of, he said.

How do you know?

Eat your salad.

But when they say they've received a threat — what does that mean?

That means — that they have information that something might happen.

Like what?

I don't know. Something.

Something dangerous?

Yes, it could be something dangerous. But I don't think it's dangerous for you or me.

So what should we do?

You said that we shouldn't make any plans.

But what should we do to protect ourselves?

There's not much we can do.

Then why are they warning us?

So that we know. Now eat your food.

Daniel asked for more coffee and glanced at his watch while the waiter fetched the carafe. Twenty minutes until the parking meter ran out.