KJARTAN
BRÜGGER
BJÅNESØY

KJÆRE PAPPA

Vi er andre menn no

Dear Pappa

Foreword

Here in this room he lulled me to sleep, woke me as a schoolboy and comforted my broken heart as a teenager. I can still remember how he picked me up and told me that everything would be all right. My father often said that.

My bedroom was next to my parents' room. The wall between the rooms thin enough that if I lay an ear flat up against it, I could hear everything they said. When I moved out, they knocked a wall down so that my room became a part of the living room - I suppose parents have to do something to cope with the empty space left behind by their departing children.

Now there's a sofa where my bed was and a piano where my desk used to be. Without thinking, I lay an ear against the wall just as I used to do and his deep voice still resounded through.

—He's so angry, I hear my father say.

—Who is? my mother asks.

—Kjartan.

—How do you mean?

—He's become so difficult.

I am Kjartan, and my father is talking about me. I'm home for a visit. It's late in the evening and my parents have just gone to bed.

As a young boy I used to listen through the wall if I heard anything that sounded like an argument; more often than not it was something or other he was angry about. Now his voice is neither irritable nor harsh. More than anything else, he sounds upset.

—Kjartan is so angry. It seems as though I can't do anything right, he says.

I want to turn back time, climb into their bed and stretch out between them, behind his brawny back. I never felt as safe as I did then. But now I don't do anything. I just lie on the sofa waiting for my father to pull himself together and go back to being his old self again.

My own kind, rowdy, generous, sick father.

For a long time, old age was something that belonged to other people. I didn't think much about it. It's an experience the young can never understand. The young can't know what it's like to grow old.

Many of my generation came late to starting their own families. We have young children on the way up while our parents are on the way out. Just as I thought I was coming to the end of following my youngest to the toilet, I had to begin helping my father on the same errand.

I'm watching him slowly fade away.

Why is it so difficult to accept that my father is slipping away into old age and illness? What does he think of it? What has it done to my mother and to their marriage?

Literature is full of feuding families, difficult fathers and troubled sons. This story isn't one of those. It is an attempt to find peace with what is, and reconciliation with what is to come.

On becoming someone else

My parents sat in the white-walled office of a hospital. Outside, biting autumn winds stripped an old beech tree of its leaves and the sky was sketched in grey.

They waited, perched on straight-backed chairs their overcoats folded neatly on their laps. My parents belong to a generation that rarely flings anything down no matter what the situation might be.

Behind a desk, a consultant doctor was sitting at his computer; he was about to read aloud from a document for them, a document about the *left posterior thalamus*, about a *complex posterial partial epilepticus* and something or other about a follow-up observation regarding *cognitive function*, *the ability to think and the intellectual and mental processes of the brain*.

She asked the doctor not to candy coat what he had to say, told him he could tell it to them straight out. The man in the white coat looked up from what he called a *neurological enquiry*. He glanced at my father and asked:

—Have you been a practical man?

After a few moments my mother spoke up.

—He's worked as a machinist his entire life and has been a man who has been able to fix most anything.

—Have you been a strong couple?

My father still didn't say a word.

—Yes we have, for over fifty years, she said.

—Good..., said the doctor.

Now he looked only at her.

—...because soon your husband will not be able to take care of himself.

The hospital invited stroke patients to attend an orientation, and she was the most keen for him to accept. More than a year had passed since the stroke and the questions were piling up.

My father had been tested and questioned. The examination took time and words didn't come to him readily any longer. In time the results were presented to them and now the doctor was reaching some kind of conclusion. My parents simply sat there, each on their straight-backed chair. A window was ajar, a car alarm blared. They could hear people chatting, others laughing. She wrapped his strong hands gently in hers. The doctor took off his glasses, looked at my father and said:

—You're a different man now.

It was my mother who told me all of this on the phone later the same day. About all the medical terms the doctor used, about how quiet my father was, about the white office, the car alarm, the naked beech tree and the grey sky. Most of all she talked about all this 'newness' they told her about her husband of all those years. About my father.

—Did you cry? I asked.

—No, not today. But I feel like crying every day I see that he isn't himself. And that maybe he'll never be himself again.

The road home – the year before

The stroke

I wake up at the crack of dawn and realise that there's barely time to get dressed. Its finally here, the holiday we've been dreaming of. We have to get going, faster than fast. Sunlight sparkles on the calm sea, the sky is deep blue, my wife is beaming, the children are cheerful, and soon our coffee's ready. What could possibly go wrong on a day like this?

We want to do everything at once and there's not a moment to lose. Out with the kayak! Out with the raft and the rubber dinghy! Out with the fish landing nets and the deckchairs! Out with the crab traps and fishing rods! Is there anything that needs painting? Never mind. We'll be swimming and sunbathing and paddling and drinking and barbecuing instead. We're going to make up for the wet and the wind and the waiting and all the crap we've had to put up with.

Now we're damn well going to have some fun.

A family of four from Hardanger is coming to join us, bread dough is on the rise, the wine is on ice and four cold beers are chilling in the shallows of the beach. It's Friday, after all. All that's left to do is slather on the sun cream and every other cliché for a summer's day by the sea. It's so perfect that it's going to hurt, because we from the west coast know that we're going to have to pay for this later.

Now if only I could get the outboard motor started. It sputtered out the evening before. I pulled on the starter cord so many times that I almost pulled my shoulder out of joint. So I rang my father as I always do when I have a practical problem. He wanted to come over right away, but I told him it could wait.

He and my mother arrive the following morning before the old coffee pot in the boathouse has finished gurgling. On the way there he's stopped off at the shop to buy two plastic-wrapped chocolate muffins for his grandkids. It has become his weekend ritual, much to the joy of Albert and Klara, and to more of a lukewarm reception from Solveig and I. But I guess that is how it is to be a grandfather. A shrink-wrapped breakfast of muffins that stay fresh until December.

My father goes to the boat with tools in his back pocket. It should be a quick job. As a machinist he's tackled bigger engines than this. He has ferried sand, cement, timber, water and gravel to the boathouse in this 14-footer. Its been said he is stone crazy after spending years wading in the shallows, gathering stones to build the dock by the boathouse.

The work didn’t stop even when he slipped and fell into the water in the middle of winter. He simply wrung the saltwater out of his woolen undershirt and carried on. One spring day he almost chopped his entire forefinger off, but simply bandaged it together with duct tape. He has given it everything he’s got in this boat, all year round. He has spent several thousand man-hours working on the boathouse. But recently we haven’t seen him in his work coverall quite so often. True enough, there’s been some terrible weather, but a long life outdoors has him well waterproofed.

But something wasn’t quite as it should be.

A few days earlier my brother’s boat had filled with water and almost sank. There was something wrong with the bilge pump. Both my brothers were on vacation in the USA, but this was something our father would be able to repair with ease. He went out in my brother’s boat while I stayed on land as his assistant. After half an hour he gave up and asked me instead to ring a handyman cousin. It was not usual to see him give up with so little effort.

Later the same day we had to move a some boards out to the boathouse. Usually he lifted huge beams as if they were toothpicks. I drove the boat and was keeping it against the dock when we had arrived. I quietly watched my father struggle. He changed his grip on the boards and tried again, but that didn’t work either. He couldn’t lift them. I could hear whispered cursing muttered beneath his breath and was unsure of whether I ought to step in to help. This was unknown territory. In the end I gave him a hand. Neither of us said anything about it.

Now it’s the outboard he’s about to fix. I see him take the cowling off in the baking sun. There are times I do that, too. It looks good and I know the right method, but I have no idea what to look for after that. He pulls the starting rope with his oily fingers. After ten to fifteen pulls he gives up and spends an unusually long time climbing out of the boat. I didn’t know that he had become so sluggish.

Back on the dock he looks completely empty, but there’s no reason to take it so hard. The engine had been running poorly for a long time and it was just a question of time before it conked out completely.

—We can take it for a service, I say.

He answers, but I don’t understand a word he’s saying. True enough, the local dialect gives us a tendency to mumble our words, but we usually manage to understand each other.

The next sentence is nothing but mush.

It's my mother who understands that something isn't right.

—Are you okay, Karstein?

If my mother uses my father's name when she's speaking to him, things are usually serious. He's clutching his chest, supporting himself against the boathouse wall with his right hand and looking helpless. We put him on a chair by the table and he fumbles for a cup, which tips over. The lukewarm coffee runs onto his right knee and the corner of his mouth droops to the left.

—Call an ambulance, she says.

I've never called an emergency number before but have often thought about what it would be like. The atmosphere is calmer than I had imagined, thanks mostly to my mother, who rarely makes a fuss about anything at all.

Solveig takes our two children into the boathouse. I breathe in, call the emergency number, sensing that I am stressed but knowing that help won't arrive any faster if I behave like a desperate next of kin. But my emergency call can best be described as halting.

I have never made an emergency call before, but I see myself as someone who handles the challenges of daily life, both small and large, reasonably well. My one big flaw is a wretched sense of direction. Finding our way is somehow something that we men are supposed to be good at, it's said to be in our DNA. While women sat in the cave and looked after the fire and the children, men went out into the unknown and returned with an animal over their shoulder. Men who got lost on the way back died out.

I have tried to disguise this fault for years. I've looked at it as a modern form of survival, because I seldom know where I am, or where I'm going. If I'm supposed to be driving east, I can end up in the west. At railway stations I rarely know which direction the train is going to come from, and I get lost in parking garages. Sometimes it's so bad that I scarcely know where the sun is going to rise. For a long time I believed that it was something I would learn, that a sense of direction would come with age. But no.

I am man without direction.

My father is gradually worsening and I am having difficulty explaining precisely where the boathouse is. The emergency operator asks whether it's east of here or west of there.

—I don't know, I reply.

She asks once again, just as calmly and friendly.

—Sorry but I have no idea!

I'm sweating. Cold sweating.

We talked about getting an emergency placard showing the precise geographical location of the boathouse a year ago, but nothing came of it.

Fortunately, I know the names of nearby islets and skerries, and get transferred to the skipper of the ambulance boat. Heknows the area and tells me to make myself visible. Like a terrified matador, I stand on the outermost edge of the dock, flapping a red t-shirt.

Just twelve minutes after I called the emergency number, the ambulance boat glides up to the dock.

One of the three uniformed men greets me with a nod, walks straight over to my father and squats down in front of him. He asks his name, date of birth, what day it is, checks his reflexes. My father fails the test. One of the other men from the ambulance boat walks a few paces away and I hear him saying that they'll need an air lift. They plan a landing on the ferry pier, just a short boat trip away.

—I'll come with you, I say.

—No, you stay with your family, my mother replies.

Solveig is holding our children by their hands. They have pressed their faces up against the glass door on the second floor of the boathouse. They wipe tears away as the stretcher carrying their grandfather is wheeled aboard.

The boat departs at full speed. A kayaker raises his paddle in its wake.

All is calm, all is chaos.

I go upstairs to the others and lift my daughter onto my lap.

—Will granddad die? she asks.

—I don't know. But excellent doctors are going to help him, I say.

Children can handle the truth. They know what's going on. They often handle death and other miseries better than we adults do. But I have doubts when Klara begins to cry inconsolably.

—I don't want granddad to die!

She's wailing and tears are streaming.

—Who's going to buy us muffins if granddad dies?

After some comforting and a glass of yellow soft drink, she calms down. She eats her muffin, draws, sings *baby, baby, oh* along with Justin Bieber. I walk outside, peel off my sweaty t-shirt and dive into the sea. I have heard that you never regret a swim, but now it just doesn't feel right. Back on dry land, my mother calls.

—You have to come here.

The roar of a helicopter fills the background.

—Jump in the car, and hurry, she says.

The preliminary diagnosis is serious cerebral hemorrghaging. He had several epileptic seizures on the short boat trip to the ferry dock.

—They're doing all they can, he needs help to breathe.

I leap into the car in my wet t-shirt, shabby sandals and shorts flecked with paint. For the first time in my life driving on our island, I'm passing other cars.

Afternoon, and yet another doctor comes into the waiting room to see us. A tall man, looking so undernourished that he might break in two at any moment. He could use more mayonnaise in his diet it seems, his handshake is limp. I haven't been bothered much with rules on conduct and bearing while growing up, but my father always impressed on us the importance of a good, solid handshake. Not too fast, never too loose.

The doctor has good news.

—Your husband is breathing without assistance again. We like that.

—Thank you, thank you very much, she replies.

The doctor thinks we ought to go home, get a good night's sleep. The situation is stable and the patient needs as much quiet as possible. Perhaps we can speak to him tomorrow. Before he leaves, he turns towards me, smiling.

—Your father is strong, he says.

My father is strong and is not going to die after all.

I feel that old sense of pride well up again.

The fear of old age

—Happy new year!

His tiny hands cling tighter around my neck. I stay crouched, not wanting him to let go, feeling his warmth even though his fingers are freezing cold.

People are toasting with champagne around us in the sports arena, the two of us have found a spot away from the crowd. More and more, I prefer it that way.

—Happy new year, *pappa*, says my son.

There are around six thousand languages in the world, and many of them share the word *pappa*. I get a feeling of happiness hearing it, I *am* pappa.

My pappa, Albert always said to me the first year he learned to speak. And I was filled with pride every time, as though being a father was an achievement. But these days this is something that can’t be taken for granted. One in four Norwegian men turns 45 without having children of their own.

—I’m looking forward to the new year, Albert says.

He’s never been up so late before.

—What are you looking forward to?

—Nothing in particular, I’m just looking forward to it.

The plan was that my parents would celebrate Christmas with us in Oslo, but my father finally got his knee operation and is now at a rehabilitation centre off the island. He didn’t want anyone to come there on New Year’s Eve, said that he didn’t need any visits. He wasn’t seriously ill, and he would soon be home. On no account were we to make a fuss about it.

—What do you think granddad's doing now? asks Albert.

—He's probably sleeping.

—Or watching TV. Sleeping and watching TV, that's what granddad always does.

I can get annoyed when my son says that my father does nothing but sleep and watch TV. Not so long ago he was a man who on New Year's Eve had his shoes polished to a high gloss, wore a freshly pressed suit and smelled of hair tonic. He would always dress for the King's speech and believed that all of us should stand for the royal anthem. I used to think it was embarrassing and parochial, but that evening I told my children that it might be nice to rise when they played God Save the King.

My son and I held hands while we watched the fireworks. If only I could press the pause button now, we are a family that works, woven together by the pleasures of everyday life.

I've seldom felt any intense longing to be finished with this life with young children. I've never experienced a Knausgårdian rage as a father of small children, or felt like a 19th century man and cursed our feminised male ideal. By and large I like these new times, even though I often wake up in a tangle with a crick in my neck in our double bed.

When I started a family everything felt new, then it all became the way things are, just like before.

Of course there has been anger and irritation; I've been frustrated by too little sleep, by stepping on Legos in the middle of the night. I've grown sick of rinsing broccoli, of eating fishcakes with macaroni and ketchup again for dinner, tired of endless rounds of nappy-changing and sick children.

Later on I've had my fill of the tacos on Fridays, had enough of volunteering on Saturdays and the free flow of AstroTurf pellets all week long. A full-size football pitch can contain over a hundred tons of black rubber balls, and roughly five per cent disappear each year, a couple of kilos of which end up in our house.

Of course there have been dark days. Only new believers, and an American I know, are happy and positive all the time.

I light a sparkler and we bump into a neighbour. He says that he always thinks about his own father on this last day of the year.

—I can still remember the smell of the cigar pappa smoked every New Year's Eve, it's burned into me. How quickly those years have passed, he says.

The neighbour is there with his eldest son.

—We have to enjoy it while we can. Before we know it we'll be standing here without kids, talking about the time they were small, he says.

The sparkler is about to burn out and the colour will soon drain from the sky. My son pulls his Manchester United hat down over his ears and I button my black overcoat. I rarely use it. I still get the sense of dressing like a grown-up whenever I wear an overcoat.

Albert scrabbles for my hand. I close my eyes, trying to remember how it was being a small boy and being with my father on New Year's Eve. We often celebrated in the company of several other families, sleeping on mattresses while the adults kept the party going. The fathers carried on, the mothers walked home.

Albert looks at me, a man dressed up.

—Are you looking forward to the new year, pappa?

—Yes, I reply.

—To the rest of your life?

—Yes.

But it's just not true because new concerns have taken a place in my life. What's going to happen to my father from now on is one thing, but then there's everything else. No one has ever accused me of being early to anything, but when it comes to our era's anxiety towards aging, I'm well ahead of the pack. I devour books on aging the way climate pessimists read about environmental catastrophes. We know that it's going to happen, just not when and how. We hope that it will be gentle, but fear the worst.

Now wherever I go I see men in the sunset of their lives. There are several of them at the library. I see the same man again and again being woken with a newspaper or a book in his hands and drool at the corners of his mouth. Always well dressed, but never awake for long. He looks like a man who once was of some importance. Now he can barely make it through a newspaper without dropping off.

—We're all going to die, many of us will grow old, but few of us imagine this change for ourselves even though there ought to be nothing more expected, wrote Simone de Beauvoir in her essay *The Coming of Age*.

The French philosopher thought that nothing should be more expected, but nothing arrives less expected than old age. Of all realities, old age is the one to which we have the most abstract relationship. To be young and to imagine oneself as old is to imagine becoming a different person, and in all change there is something terrifying .

Today, perhaps more than ever, everyone is supposed to age successfully. Staying healthy and active is our own responsibility. When decay begins, you have failed, and you only have yourself to thank for not exercising more, for not drinking less, for not eating better.

Another challenge of growing old is the reluctance to grow older.

Advertising that targets the elderly often shows grey-haired men and women performing successful imitations of younger people. They wear the same clothes, drive stylish cars, party and exercise as though they were twenty-four. Being old is not seen as a value in itself, but more as a provocation against modern man. Because in this day and age most everything can be fixed.

Just not old age.

The last of the sparklers has fizzled out. I try calling my father's mobile one more time, but it's still switched off. I wonder if he is looking forward to the new year, and what he's hoping for.

He has never quite got the hang of the mobile. His fingers are far too big for the little keys. I don't know if he can see fireworks where he is, but then again, he's never cared much for that fleeting pleasure.

It would have been nice if he was here now, and I'm glad that he isn't.

My son looks at me. He tells me that we'll always celebrate this evening together. I nod, unable to do anything else. But one day he'll be sitting there without me, of course he will. Not too long into the future he'll be making memories of his own in which I play no part, both on New Year's Eve and all the other days. Just like me, one day he's going to have conversations with friends about close fathers, distant fathers, and fathers who are full of themselves. Or just full of booze.

We all have our different stories, but all of us seem equally astonished, almost furious, betrayed, that our fathers are not what they once were.

—I wish it was fashionable to be old, said King Harald during his New Year's speech when he was 75.

There's still a ways to go before the King gets his wish.

In early January I see several of them; in garden patches, on balconies and pavements they stand, crooked and decaying. How brutal life can be, too: One night you're the centre of attention, decked in stars and glitter; the day after you're out in the cold, and soon forgotten.

I've just thrown our Christmas tree out when my mother calls. I can hear in her voice that something is wrong.

—Pappa can't stay at the rehabilitation centre anymore.

When my mother speaks about our father to my brother and me, she just calls him *pappa*. For many the word is full of grief, anger and yearning. For us it's mostly happiness and affection.

—Is he coming home? I ask.

—No, he can't walk.

—What then?

—No...it's just terrible...

Almost without exception, no matter what was happening, she could stay calm, but now her voice is trembling.

—...Pappa has been given a place at the old folks home, for old people.

—Is it just temporary?

—Yes, but the old folks home, Kjartan!

She's using my name now. Now it's serious.

—It's not called that anymore, I say.

She knows that it's been a long time since it was called *old folks's home*. At a certain point in time it was decided that the name *old folk's home* would be changed to *elderly home*, since elderly is more neutral than old. Now *senior* is about to take over from *elderly*. Today elderly are called *clients* at *service centres*. On our island it's called 'Care and Nursing Centre'.

As long as he can't walk, it's difficult to live at home in a house with stairs. He is going to have to stay at the nursing home. I don't understand what she's getting so worked up about.

She has nothing against elderly, but sometimes I'm not sure whether she sees herself as one of them. Her greatest fear is having to end up in a home because she can't manage the house, the garden and herself on her own.

None of us say it out loud, but both of us are thinking of this next stop as a waiting room for death. It doesn't matter what you call it – there's a reason they live at a *care and nursing centre*. People living there can no longer look after themselves.

I barely saw the inside of an old people's home when I was growing up. The closest I came was when the Constitution Day parade stopped outside the nursing home. The marching band played and everyone sang. Some of the old people would sit and wait in blankets, some of them nodding off. You know life's not so bad when you can fall asleep to the 'Old Hunter's March' played by an occasionally tuned school band on the national day.

But my father doesn't complain, even if he spends most of his time in bed. He gets his food served, has a TV in his room and can sleep whenever he likes. It's only temporary.

My mother thinks he's handling the stay better than she quite cares for.

My father and Wayne Rooney

Autumn has come creeping and the leaves are running red. On fine days the low autumn sun bleeds a few golden minutes until darkness wins out.

—Are grandma and granddad coming for Christmas?

Throughout autumn, this is the one question that Albert and Klara return to again and again. That is, except for the nagging about getting a cell phone or an iPad for Christmas. I can give them an emphatic 'No' to that question.

But what about my parents coming for Christmas?

That I honestly don't know.

I call home to ask on a bad day.

—Sorry for grumbling, but I'm tired today, she says.

My parents had decided to attend a lecture with a priest from eastern Norway titled 'When life changes'. It was about illness and married life, about being next of kin. My father changed his mind at the last minute.

—And he's the one who needed to go. Sometimes I think I mark how life is changing more than he does, she says.

Travelling away from home has become a strain. They were lucky to have visited China, Egypt and Russia before he had his stroke. Now travelling is a lot of fuss. Medicines need to be arranged, doctor's appointments changed, physiotherapy cancelled. She wants him to organise some of this himself, and he often agrees, but it never happens.

She is the one who has to pack, check timetables, carry the bags to the train. Flying is out of the question, there's too much stress with the security checks and long waits. In the past he was the one who knew the route to airports and railway stations, who found the tickets and hauled the luggage. Now he just follows her, always a touch late. It's as if he doesn't realise that buses, ferries and trains depart on a schedule.

—We'll have to wait a bit and see whether we can travel for Christmas, she says.

Early in December they decide to take a chance that everything will be fine. Once my mother makes up her mind, there's no changing it. A few days before Christmas Eve they are on their way. I get a phone call as the train passes Arna station, and as usual she is brief when talking on the phone in public.

—We made the train. Everything's fine. Nice weather. He's already asleep. I've had a coffee and found my knitting. See you at the station.

Click.

Albert and I are there early. I ask him to pay attention to everyone here watching and waiting, young and old, happy and sad. The polished rails take some people away, bring others home. Some have been travelling for a long time, perhaps lives have changed in the meantime.

All these hopes and expectations buzzing anticipation as they search out their people in the throngs of passengers streaming past. I think about all the times my parents have stood hunting for me, and how I've taken it for granted that they would be there to receive me.

One after another they climb out of the train, young children with red Santa hats, Christmas gifts sticking out of holdalls and rucksacks and blue Ikea bags.

For years my father was a popular Santa Claus on the island, a duty he took most seriously with his homemade beard and knitted sweater, a gentle air and a rumbling voice. I tell Albert about the time my parents and I had to pick up an aunt who had been living in France for a year. I was twelve, still mortified about most things my father did. Just before my aunt landed from France, my father vanished into the toilet. He re-emerged dressed as Santa, equipped with brown cheese, chewing gum, and waving a Norwegian flag.

—Promise me that you'll never do that, Albert says.

—Have no fear, I reply.

The platform is clearing and my father is the last one out of the train carriage. I see them before they see me; with the three steps down from the train, he has enough to focus on. She's struggling with the large, black suitcase, the only one they have brought with them. We hug each other.

—Good to see you, pappa, I say.

—Yes...

He pulls up the zip on his jacket.

—...but it's warmer at home.

There are no reason to take offense here, it's simply the way many west coasters say hello. Now I'm just happy that he's here. It's been a while since the last time.

I notice immediately that he's in no better shape. He hesitates at the escalator, stops and uses a long time before he pulls himself together and jumps, just managing to get both feet on the same step.

He struggles to get in and out of the car, struggles to get out of his jacket, not to mention his shoes. He doesn't complain, but there is no hint of enthusiasm either.

I can't blame him.

There's much he doesn't hear, much he doesn't say. I think about how everything used to be, how he looked forward to every Christmas. I hope all this comes to an end soon.

Soon, yes, but just a little way to go still yet. Like the first Christmas my parents came to visit after Solveig and I had moved in together. We went to the Christmas market, bought gifts and good food, sickness and old age were still something that belonged to other people. We were up until five in the morning, talked about life and made toasts to love. If I only knew then what I've read in his diaries, that as a young man he loved to write and had ideas about the future that *were called nonsense, castles in the air*. Everything I should have said to him then.

Now my father is taking an early night and has moved into Albert's room, it is nearest the toilet. Just my mother and I stay up, sitting in the kitchen.

Half an hour later I hear a thud from the floor below. The sound came from Albert's room. Wayne Rooney has taken a tumble from the wall, felled by a formerly irascible linesman. The poster, framed under glass, is from before Rooney was put on the bench at Manchester United. There they lie, two heroes who have given it their all. My biggest childhood hero is off the team entirely now and has written in his diary that he perhaps always had *a fear of not being good enough*.

I take Wayne Rooney under my arm, say goodnight quietly to my father, and make the rounds to see to Albert and Klara, who are still up.

—Is granddad okay? she asks.

—Yes, he's fine now, I reply.

—Good. You have to take good care of him, she says.

—I'm doing the best I can.

But I'm not sure that I believe it myself.

Back at the kitchen table my mother is telling me about the train journey, about an elderly couple who sat in the same carriage. They were chatting and laughing, pointing out the views, reading aloud to each other from the newspapers. She watched them, and was filled with sadness.

—I miss telling stories, and having stories told to me. Talking about the little things and big things. Your father and I no longer have real conversations like that old couple. Older couple. They were probably the same age as us, but I still think of all old people as being older than me.

She's quick to add that she still loves him, my father.

—It's good to have him in the house, I'm glad that he's around. We can still have nice meals, but he never makes them unless I ask him to. When he goes to the shop he only brings home whatever's on the list. He used to bring little surprises home.

Neither of them had imagined a life of retirement like this one. The way she sees him has gradually changed.

—I can accept that things aren't the way they used to be, but it can be frustrating that he doesn't realise it himself. He complains that his other friends have grown old and are difficult to talk to. It’s as if there are some missing connections in there. I know that is part of his diagnosis, but still it’s difficult to accept. There’s a lot that I miss, little things like the smell of coffee in the doorway when I come home.

—Do you still get angry?

—Yes, and sometimes I yell at him. Now and then I ask for forgiveness, but often I don’t.

—Why not?

—Because when I get angry he pulls himself together and so I think, well, at least he’s got something to work with. But then sometimes he can’t do the simplest things, like putting the house number sign on the garage.

Until recently, addresses on our island were just names and postcodes, but eventually streets were given names and houses numbers. The sign for the house arrived in the mailbox and was supposed to go up on the garage wall. She thought that it would be a good job for him. For several weeks she hinted that it needed doing, but nothing happened.

One day he made up his mind, toiled away finding the right tools, going in and out, he spent several hours at it before he was done. The sign was hung dangling on a single screw. She could hardly believe it.

—You are allowed to feel down, I say.

—Yes, but not for long, she replies.

His doctor has said our father is eligible to spend one day a week in the assisted care centre in our village, as a form of support for her. She disapproves. My father isn’t going there. I won’t hear of it, she says.

I pull out a brochure from the National Association of Stroke Victims, and read aloud that strokes can cause obvious injuries such as paralysis or speech problems, but also hidden changes such as impaired sense of direction, lethargy, reduced attention span or a shift in personality. These changes can cause distress and may be difficult to understand. It is only in time that cognitive injuries that are completely incomprehensible to the stroke victim and their closest relatives will emerge.

—So many words, she says.

—You don’t want to hear any more?

—No, I don’t need to.

—Why not?

—Because I see it with my own eyes every day.

One of the best things I can do for her this Christmas is to take pappa out for a daily walk. I start the very next day.

There's a greengrocer a couple of minutes away, run by two enterprising Turks. It's a shop my father always used to visit. Mostly just to look, but always to buy a newspaper. Now he just comes along, buys nothing, merely waits, standing slightly unstable in the doorway.

I go to the cashier to pay for a bag of oranges and point discretely at him waiting.

—That's my father. He's had a stroke.

I don't know why I said it. Perhaps to explain, or to excuse him for not saying hello.

—You're lucky, says the one behind the till.

—Lucky?

—My father had a stroke too, but he died a week later.

On the way home I still feel ashamed and try to make amends for what I've done.

—I'm glad you're here, pappa.

He comes to halt and looks at me.

—And I'm glad that you've found yourself such a wonderful wife, he says.

Finally

I am going to be alone with my father for a full 24 hour day. My mother needs a break, and I prepare as if I am a babysitter. Checking if there's anything special I need to think through beforehand, making sure which medicines he has to take. I know that salt-cured herring and cold potatoes is still one of his summer favourites, and ask what he wants to watch on the television after dinner.

When we are finished with dinner we'll eat strawberries and cream and watch adventurer Lar Monsen hike the trail from Skogadalsbøen to Fleskedalen. If there's enough time I'll look up a few boats for sale online. This is our plan, my father and I, a Saturday evening in July, minute by minute.

He changes for dinner and puts on a checkered shirt with some blue in it that he got from me as a Christmas present after his stroke. The two of us haven't been alone for a meal since he made pancakes with bacon for me, now we've set the table with napkins and candles.

He cheerfully wolfs down the cured herring, breaking the best bits off with seasoned movements. Other days he struggles to dress himself, mixes up names, makes a mess of his food, struggles with his knife and fork, can't get his pills out of the package, and for the most part doesn't say a word all day long. But not now, not tonight. It's a question of catching him at the right moment, and I take a chance on a serious conversation.

—Do you think about your own health these days?

—No, not much, he says.

—Why not?

—Don't know. Whatever is going to happen will happen.

He claims that he's still not afraid. But what about that evening when he wanted to sleep the night on the sofa and said it was so difficult? He doesn't quite remember, or it may be he doesn't want to remember. Right here and right now everything's fine.

—What do you think about me writing this book?

—That is still just fine. Isn't it?

—I'm telling the story of you becoming a different man.

—Yes, and that's true.

—I write that I miss the old version you.

—Mamma says the same thing.

—Do you miss the man you used to be?

For a moment he falls quiet, stretches out after more cured herring.

—Yes, of course I do.

The herring fat runs down his chin, I wipe him off with a napkin.

He says that with time it has become easier to accept help, both from us and from others. That it is something he wouldn't even have believed about himself a short time ago.

—That's life, he says.

My father says that more and more often.

—When I was younger I imagined that it would be sad for those left behind if I was suddenly gone. Now I'm not so sure, he says.

My heart sinks.

—What do you mean?

—Things aren't the same as they used to be here in this house. Maybe it wouldn't be a great loss if I just disappeared?

—You mustn't say such things.

—Most important of all is to be at peace with your family. And I am. But you know what one of my favourite things in the whole world is?

—No?

—Stockfish with white sauce, potatoes and bacon. That's what we'll have for dinner tomorrow, and I look forward to it. Shall we eat dessert in the living room?

My father doesn't want to die, but he's sick of the serious talk and would rather eat strawberries and cream in the living room. It's a beautiful summer evening, but I don't bother asking him if he wants to be outside.

This evening we'll do it his way, my father and I on the sofa in front of the television.

We serve ourselves and watch Lars Monsen walk and walk.

When Monsen arrives at his destination, my father thanks me for the evening. He sets off with small steps, in his skipper's cap and his walker. .

—This I guess is the closest I'll come to skippering a boat again.

He says goodnight, doffs his cap and says a final farewell.

I lie down on the sofa and watch reruns of Trond-Viggo Torgersen. In the programme *But Why?* he and his guests answer any question from audience, both imaginable and unimaginable.

There's still a lot that I wonder about. Is my father as fearless as he claims? Am I ever going to find out what he keeps hidden behind his innermost walls?

Is this how we come to the stage where it's time to take our leave, where enough is enough? A time when we become increasingly indifferent to it all and it seems as though life only consists of reruns? Do we reach a point where life no longer has a purpose, and death is a reasonable and welcome conclusion?

That's the hope.

For all summers must eventually come to an end.

It’s been a fine evening and I’m content with what remains. He has become a different man. We are both different men now.

The sofa is still pushed close up against the thin wall. I put my ear up to it and hear the sound of my father struggling to get undressed.

After the evening news I slip into his bedroom, creep up into the bed and lay down behind him. It feels safe, but different from before. I stroke him gently across his brawny back. His breathing slows, then he starts a little. I can’t tell whether he’s awake or not.

—Is that you, Kjartan?

—Yes, I say.

—Are you leaving?

—No, I’m staying here. Go back to sleep, I just wanted to say I love you.

—That’s all right. I love you too. I was just halfway into a dream and was about to buy myself a boat...

He rolls over onto his back.

—...a Nimbus 29-footer, with a beautiful cabin and a good bed for your mother and I. We were going on a trip, the galley was stocked with good food, we’d hauled anchor and were ready to sail out the fjord. Sounds nice, doesn’t it?

—Yes pappa, it does.

—Do you know what I’m going to call the boat?

—No, I don’t.

He frames an imaginary nameplate with his hands.

—It’s going to be called *Finally*.

My father is smiling.

A few minutes later he falls asleep, and sails away.