

JENS M JOHANSSON

**“A
pure joy
to read”**

VG



**“Funny, vulnerable and
a very good novel”**

ADRESSEAVISEN

Jens M Johansson

Middle Class Hero

Sample Translation by Paul Russell Garrett

The first thing he heard was the sound of his own voice. 'It's recording now, I think.' A pause, then nothing but the hum of a fan or a ventilation system in the background. Then all of a sudden, noise. That must have been when he moved his mobile phone. He remembered doing that. For no apparent reason, other than a concern that the phone would inhibit the informant if it was in plain view on the table. So he had slipped it inside his jacket pocket, which was hanging over the back of his chair. Then he heard the informant's voice. Exactly what he had said was not easy to make out. Most of all, it sounded like the man was speaking to him from inside his jacket pocket. First he just made a brief comment. But when Adam started asking questions, his responses grew longer, though still impossible to hear. Strangely, Adam's voice continued to be clear as a bell. He looked down at the mobile despondently, even though it was obviously pointless. The recording sounded the way it sounded.

He rewound and tried to listen to one of the answers again. He leaned over the phone with his pen resting against the pad of paper. 'That may well be.' Was that the first thing the man had said? 'That may well be, but at the same time, there could be any number of reasons...' Adam stopped the recording and rewound it again. 'That may well be...' Yes, that must have been what he had said. Adam noted it down without stopping the playback, so he only listened to what followed with half an ear while he wrote, and now it sounded like the informant had said something completely different from what he had first heard. After going on like that for a while, he stopped the recording with a mix of frustration and desperation. He took a deep breath, tried to collect himself. Maybe he should just try to remember what they had said, he thought. Adam shut his eyes. Pictured the two of them sitting in the back room, him and the informant. He took another breath, thought he caught a whiff of machine oil or whatever the smell had been. His first question was straightforward. He heard himself asking: 'Could you briefly describe your work?' Without thinking, he imitated the smile he had ended the question with. He studied the informant in front of him. Waited for him to speak. And the informant answered, that certainly wasn't the issue. The problem was, Adam couldn't remember a single word. The only thing he could say with confidence was that the informant had a dialect from the west of Norway, though he couldn't say exactly where in the west of Norway.

He returned to the recording in a state of despair. Fast-forwarded and rewound on the off-chance he might find something. Pressed play. Stopped. Pressed play again. Adam forced himself to write down anything he heard. After all, documentation was important.

Informant A: ... (*barely audible*) the old man, no doubt. He taught me that. Especially Renault. Ha ha. ... (*inaudible*) ... units.

Me: Jeez. Do you think... could we say... I almost think... (*clothes rubbing against the microphone*) ... Renault? The chassis... or do you think that wasn't it ...?

Informant A: Yeah, the chassis. Obviously, it isn't (*inaudible*) ...

Me: Ha ha ha ha ha... (*pause, swooshing sound, from the vent?*)

Informant A: (*low mumbling*) ... industrial waste.

Me: Ha ha ha ha ... I bet. Ha ha ha... But... What do you think... ?

Informant A: ... winterproofed (?) ... metal compactor (?), three millimetres... (*mumbling lasting for one minute and four seconds*).

Me: So... right, how should I put it... car?

Informant A: (*inaudible*) ...

Once again Adam heard his laughter fill the recording, almost in hysterics, and seemingly on this occasion, unprovoked. Then another pause, like he was waiting for something, whatever that might have been.

At that point Adam stopped the recording. Strictly speaking, 'informant' was a term he had picked up studying humanities at uni, but he thought it gave the project an air of secret services, code names and drinks in Damascus.

God, what a harsh and high-pitched voice he had. Reluctantly, he put on a pair of headphones, in a final attempt to better make out what the informant was saying. He started the recording again, but the only thing he managed to hear was his thin voice in all of its loathsomeness. It sounded like he was literally floating around in the recording. Adam pictured the informant wearing the blue grease-stained boiler suit. The smell of petrol in the garage had reminded him of summer and still waters. By the window, a filthy table covered with tools, engine parts, rags and oilcans.

His cackling started in again, then a loud and sharp intake of breath, then laughter again, and now it would be painfully obvious to anyone at all that his forced laughter was first and foremost an expression of floundering nerves.

Adam took off the headphones, put them down. He had tidied up his desk for this.

There had been loads of speculation. Extraordinary government grants were rarely distributed; grants of this size were even rarer. Arts Council Norway was going to fund a one-time supplemental grant for a whopping 700 000 kroner.

When the name of the recipient was announced, the winner turned out to be the untipped candidate, Adam Berg. He had hardly been able to believe it himself. Out of all the applicants - 573 - they chose him.

That day they phoned from far and near (at least that's how it felt), and Adam responded to their calls to the best of his ability. Through the grant, the Arts Council wanted to stimulate literature based on the concept of 'The Others,' the journalists repeated, and Adam told them more or less what he had prepared: I'm thrilled to receive financial support in order to get a chance to write about the burning issues of our time. I intend to write a highly political book about the kind of people literature rarely includes. People working normal jobs, people experiencing down times, people sitting behind the counter at the shop. Quite simply, about people.

In addition, the news report from the wire service, which was repeated in various places, highlighted a quote from his application. They had selected the passage where he paraphrased Hamlet's *time is out of joint* into 'the world has become unhinged', a choice he was rather pleased with. He was also referred to as *the critically acclaimed author* in one notification after the other, and in the end he had to close his eyes in disbelief. And while he repeated the phrase *the critically acclaimed author Adam Berg* to himself, one wondrous thought rang out in his head: *Good god, I'm back.*

‘Dad! DAD! DAD!’ It was his daughter, Emma, screaming at the top of her lungs, as though she had been shouting at him for ages. ‘Iris!’ he shouted back. ‘IRIS! IRIS!’

Three weeks had passed since that wondrous thought.

Iris didn’t answer. Adam got up, muttering to himself, *how am I supposed to get an honest day’s work done in this bloody fucking house*: ‘WHAT?’ He flung open the door. ‘IRIS!’

Emma was standing on a stool in the kitchen, balancing three plates above her head. ‘What are you doing?’ he said. ‘Why don’t you just climb down from the stool?’

‘I wanted to use the pasta plates for dinner. I like them. I think we should use them more often, not have them gathering dust.’ She was so precocious it was almost unbearable. He grabbed the plates. ‘Where’s your mother?’

‘Dunno,’ she said, as though nothing mattered.

Adam went out into the hall, still holding the pasta plates, the opportunity stood at the end of the hall and shouted downstairs: ‘IRIS!’

‘I’M IN THE LOO! FOR GOD’S SAKE! I’M IN THE LOO!’

On his way back to the kitchen Adam grumbled to himself: ‘If I’m going to work at home, I do have to be allowed to *work*.’ Angrily he put down a plate at each setting on the white kitchen table. Iris appeared in the doorway after having emerged from the bathroom. But Adam didn’t look up. ‘Pasta plates?’ he said. ‘Who the hell has pasta plates?’

In the office after dinner, Adam contemplated whether or not he should save the recording of the interview on the computer. Not that he was entirely sure how to transfer an audio file from his mobile. He assumed it required some sort of cable that he didn't have.

Adam stood by the window. Unsure whether he would call this time of the year late summer or early autumn, a familiar sensation came over him: a lack of perspective. Adam felt as though a whole lot of things remained unfinished in his life, or even worse, half-finished, or lying in a bag or a drawer, like all the spare keys he was afraid to throw away. Once in a while, Adam would pull himself together and see if the spare keys fit any of the locks in the flat, basement or attic. But when they didn't fit, he still thought the safest thing to do was to return them to the junk drawer, because he was one of those people who let go and abandoned themselves to a complex and fragmented world.

As far back as he could remember, he had been preoccupied with *doing his part*. It was not an encouraging and friendly admonition, he heard the words in his father's harsh tone. His father's strict sense of duty was probably a legacy of his childhood, but who could say why people turned out the way they did. Though Adam's father probably hadn't been mollified by spending his early adulthood as part of a radical movement where cadre opinion and self-criticism played a central role. Adam was taught to think that the people who had something negative to say were the people you should listen to. And nobody had more negative things to say about Adam than Adam himself. There was no respite in his mind. Adam was an eternal renovation project. Every repair exposed new, almost insurmountable shortcomings. That was how he saw it. He was patched together with gaffer tape and covered with paint. Then again, who wasn't?

Adam put on his reading glasses. 'Informant A', he entered into the computer. For ethical reasons he had decided not to use the names of any of the people he interviewed while doing research for the book. 'Informant A' was Tore Bjørgum, who worked at the garage where he'd had the locks changed on the Škoda after losing his keys (no spare in the drawer, of course not!). He had picked him as a kind of soft launch. Adam and Iris knew the owner of the garage, whose daughter had been best friends with Emma from since nursery school. Even though the daughters had gone their separate ways, Adam and Iris were still friends with Roger and Linn, her parents. Over dinner at their place, and after a good deal of wine, Iris had bragged about the grant, presumably in the belief that the couple had heard the good news and simply forgotten to congratulate him, which could happen to anyone. In their excitement, Adam and Iris had not considered that culture announcements have a relatively limited impact area.

‘700 000 kroner!’ Roger had exclaimed, before he got up to fetch a bottle of champagne from the basement, filled the glasses and smiled sarcastically: ‘Cheers to the working class, you two!’

‘Anyway,’ Adam had said, ‘do you think it would be possible for me to speak to one of your employees?’ He looked up at Roger.

‘Not me?’ he answered and burst out laughing. ‘One of my idiots?’

‘Stop showing off,’ Linn said.

‘I think it would be a bit awkward speaking to you, we know each other. And anyway you’re the boss...’

‘Any one of them?’

‘Yes, exactly.’

‘Maybe one who’s a little smarter than the others, or?’

At that point Adam regretted mentioning his plans for the book altogether.

Linn broke in and said to her husband: ‘You should talk to Tore, then.’

Adam sat looking at the screen. The words ‘Informant A, car mechanic,’ shone at him. The plan had been to jot down a few key words for each interview, so that it would be easier to track when it came time for the actual writing. Now he didn’t know what to write. Had Tore not been one of Roger’s employees, he could have asked him to conduct the interview again, but as it was, that would be too embarrassing. Roger would definitely find out about it. In the end Adam typed ‘unsuccessful’ in the comment field. Still there was something about the actual process of archiving, which, despite everything, gave him a feeling of having laid the first stone in the foundation. Just then his phone lit up. He sighed quietly and held the mobile up to his ear. He heard his father rustling on the other end. ‘Dad?’

His dad was sitting shirtless by the kitchen table. His stomach looked like a drumhead. He lived here now after breaking up with his last girlfriend, in a cramped two-bedroom flat in a block of flats in Disen. Adam tidied up the food in the small fridge.

‘Are you aware that there is no evidence to show that jogging is good for your health?’ his dad said.

Adam didn’t reply.

‘It’s true.’

‘All right.’

‘As sure as death.’ His bare wrinkled feet poked out of the legs of his jeans. Adam was concerned that, following the operation, his pale skin had got a yellowish tinge he didn’t care for.

‘Things aren’t true just because lots of people say them,’ his dad continued.

Adam straightened up, shut the fridge. He was used to his father coming up with statements like that, claims that more often than not were supported by rather hazy evidence. ‘But they don’t become true just because you say them, either.’

His dad chortled with a heavy breath, clearly delighted at his son’s sarcasm. Then he continued to talk about other things he had read since his last visit. About wolves and sheep farming, or about melting gold, or about the water that had to be shut off in the block of flats for hours, or *had* been shut off, possibly, Adam wasn’t paying attention, just noted that his dad eventually returned to the question about jogging, one of his hobby horses. Adam thought about something Iris had once said after a visit: ‘Good God, how that man can talk.’

‘What?’ his father said, always afraid of missing out on something.

‘Nothing,’ Adam said. He glanced outside. There were two tennis courts below the window, empty and neglected.

‘700 000 kroner, Adam. I must say.’

‘Yes, it is a rather large sum. I wouldn’t have believed it myself, I have to say. With 573 applicants and all that,’ he added, unable to stop himself.

His dad ignored the boast. ‘700 000,’ he repeated. ‘That’s a lot of money.’

‘Yes.’

‘About 300 000 more than the annual salary of an unskilled labourer in manufacturing. Or a forester. And twice as much as a cleaner.’

‘Do you know the average salary of every occupation, or what?’

‘More or less.’

‘You’ve memorised them?’

‘I’m interested.’ He looked up at Adam. ‘So, *the others*, I mean... ’ he muttered, before grinning wryly. ‘What do you actually mean by, *exploring the term...* ’ He pretended to be searching for what the term again, even though he had just said it. His dad smiled and pronounced the words pretentiously: ‘... *the others?*’

‘Yes, that is the question.’ Adam gave him a wry smile in return.

His dad looked up. ‘Fancy a beer?’

Adam glanced out the window again, he had to get out of here. ‘Sorry, I’m driving.’

‘One beer won’t hurt.’

Adam gave a strained smile, but his father didn’t need more than that, he was already up from his chair, though not without some difficulty. ‘I’ll grab us one. “The others,”’ he quietly chuckled before announcing: ‘By the way, those tennis courts are a disgrace.’

‘Yes, you’ve never been much of a fan of tennis.’

‘No, it’s just such a posh sport. When everyone was boycotting South Africa, they continued to participate in tennis and golf. The same went for Rhodesia. But actually I was thinking of how the courts are simply falling into disrepair. Why is nobody maintaining them? You can’t simply let things go to pieces. Not even tennis courts,’ he added. ‘It’s a matter of respect.’ His father shut the fridge door. ‘And you know how I feel about that.’

‘Yep.’

‘Build things and try to be useful. Work. Get stuck in and don’t give up when faced with adversity. Those are values we ought to preserve.’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘Not everyone can be extraordinary. Mediocrity is a fine ideal.’

‘Yep.’

‘Yes,’ his father said, placing two bottles firmly on the table.

‘Do you think you’re mediocre?’ Adam ventured.

‘At best,’ his father replied. ‘But to all intents and purposes, we both are. And that doesn’t make us any less worthy.’

‘No.’

‘I built a boat when I was living with Mr and Mrs Alme in Ulsteinvik, you know about that.’

‘Yes. Mosse and Jens-Leif.’ Adam found it hard to say Jens-Leif without laughing.

‘Just a little wooden rowboat, mind, and maybe it didn’t turn out very well, I was just a novice, just a child, in fact, but I built it on my own. Sanded and planed, hammered and lacquered. I must have applied six coats.’

‘I know.’

‘Have I told you about this before?’ his father said, and for a moment Adam was concerned that his dad really was heading for dementia, and he considered asking whether he knew about the side effects of his medication. But then his father broke into a big, satisfied grin because he had managed to trick his son into thinking that he hadn’t realised he was repeating himself.

‘How are things at home?’ he asked.

‘All right, I suppose.’

‘Iris is too good for you, do you realise that?’

‘Yes.’

‘Cheers, Adam.’

Adam opened the gate and stepped onto the tennis court. The surface was asphalted. Here and there a few weeds were poking up. He tested the ladder of the umpire chair. It was sturdy enough. He climbed up and took a seat. Only a few of the beads used to count the number of games and sets remained. The metal chair was rusty. He ran his fingers over the rough surface, and Adam came to think of the automatic weapon his father used to keep in the bedroom wardrobe when he was growing up. As a single dad, his father would probably have been able to get out of doing his military service, but he had enjoyed it, at least he thought he was supposed to. Adam didn't know which one. But he remembered his father arriving home in his uniform, which he continued to wear well into the evening, and remembered how he would conduct himself differently in it. Adam remembered thinking how exciting it was to have dinner with a soldier, but later he just ended up connecting those memories with his father's romanticised view of revolution. For a number of years they did practically nothing other than argue about it.

There was hardly a liberation army that his father didn't keep track of and which he didn't fully and completely support from their single-family home in Sinsen.

From the umpire chair, Adam looked across the grass between Trondheimsveien and the blocks of flats. All things considered, he felt better than he had done in a long time. That is, he *had* felt better than in a long time, until his father had blurted out that Iris was too good for him. What the hell did he know?

Ten months had passed. Ten brief months since she entered his office and told him that she had been unfaithful.

'What?'

'I had an affair.'

He had despised her calmness. He had felt like hitting her for the sake of equity, or simply for the satisfaction of getting back at her. 'An affair! An affair! What the hell does that mean?' he screamed. 'One time? Several times? Where? In our bed? Who was it?'

She'd told him that the affair had gone on for a while, but that they had always gone to a hotel. The idea still made him nauseous. She had cried and apologised. He had cried and fumed. 'Fucking cunt!' And then she'd told him that she felt like she had already lost Adam, that was why she had done it. He was so disillusioned, she told him, so heavy, so dark and gloomy. 'You've lost your sense of direction, you don't believe in anything anymore.' And he bellowed: 'And you thought this would help!' With his arms hanging helplessly at his side, he clenched his fists. 'Who have you been fucking?'

Then Emma had arrived home from school and they'd had to restrain themselves somewhat.

‘Who is it?’ he had continued the conversation in the bedroom that night. ‘Who? I have to know who!’ But it was no use. Iris refused to give him a name. ‘It isn’t important,’ she simply said, over and over again, and in the end he had given up.

He stayed for Emma’s sake. Not that he thought his daughter would be broken by the fact that her parents split up. It was just that he couldn’t stand the thought of only seeing her every other week. Particularly not when he was in such agony. His daughter was in many ways his salvation, and the humiliation grew more manageable as the weeks passed, and his mind grew easy. If nothing else, out of pure exhaustion. But most of all: he loved Iris, and there wasn’t much he could do about that.

Adam climbed down and took a few steps out onto the tennis court. For a moment he just stood there. Then he spun around and marched towards the umpire chair: ‘Excuse me?’ he said. With a hand on his hip he looked defiantly at a judge that only he could see. He flung out his arms, and with a feeling of liberation he shouted so that his voice reverberated between the blocks of flats: ‘You cannot be serious!’ A smile crossed his lips. He was fucking back.

‘Adam,’ Iris shouted from the kitchen. ‘You’ve got to see this. Bloody West Norwegians.’ She laughed crudely. Adam went in to join her. ‘What?’ Iris held up the front page of the only newspaper they still subscribed to. Under the headline ‘West Norwegian Devil’ was the tagline: ‘Lars Steinvik writes poetry on the side of good taste.’

Iris looked up, her face full of mischief. ‘What does that even mean?’ He loved her when she was in this mood. She filled his life the way a duvet slips into its cover, he used to think, but after the affair, thoughts like that, particularly those that dealt with bedding, were also tinged with grief. She still didn’t deserve his love. ‘Let me tell you,’ she continued without waiting for him to answer. ‘He writes about cocks and pussy, and about floppy breasts under T-shirts and great-grandmother’s tadpoles—’ The final part was an expression she had made up and which she liked to wheel out on occasion. ‘And it’s so brilliantly crude, so bare down there, boyish and randy.’

‘Did he write that?’

‘No, those are my words. *Good taste.*’ She sniggered. ‘That’s us, that. It doesn’t matter how many cabinet ministers and state secretaries trickle over here, across the mountains spewing their racist, reactionary messages. People from the west of Norway continue to get away with writing about Oslo, about the arrogance they encounter here, take our downstairs neighbour, the one from west Norway, what was it she said when we stopped to say hello to her? That nobody in Oslo stopped to say hello, but she hasn’t bloody well said hello a single time after seven years sharing the same stairwell. No matter what, they can always plead outsiderdom—and write about their own banished fate! – even though they are de facto regular weekend columnists at the biggest papers in the country.’

Adam had taken a seat. ‘De facto is probably a term that could be used against you in this case.’

‘I think it’s the mountains that are their undoing,’ Iris continued. ‘This West Norwegianism stays with them like one great seething romantic boil. They move here, but when they have kids, they start to feel ashamed about the choice they have made. Imagine letting your little poppets grow up in Oslo! But now they’ve got good jobs here, extravagant spending habits. So to shield them from the shame, their smug pride rises to the top like oil on water. They idolise farms clinging to a mountainside. They start to talk about Norwegian culture. They are concerned for it. And they live in the city, so they know what they’re talking about, they think, even though their children go to private school, because they can afford it, and of course they have seen right through the school system, because these are people who can see through anything, they have the mountains at their back, courage in their chest and contempt for the capital in their gaze, and then finally, what’s more natural than to turn against

immigrants. Soon—when they feel safe, or have had a little too much to drink—they talk shit about Muslims and believe they are being critical of power.’

‘West Norwegians?’

‘Smug fucks.’

The first time he saw Iris, she worked as a DJ at a bar. He summoned his courage and asked her if she could play ‘Alphabet St.’, which was meant to be more than just a song request: *I’m gonna talk so sexy, she’ll want me from my head to my feet*. Iris had taken off her headphones and smiled, giving him a look that revealed she knew she could do whatever she wanted with him, and nodded, before returning to her vinyls. She never played his song. He kept an eye on her all night, and he had never seen anything more impressive than the way Iris completely controlled the packed room from the booth where she stood, her self-assured movements, when she raised her fist in the air, for example, so untroubled in her actions, and so agonisingly beautiful. Adam waited until the lights went up, and then they had gone back to her place. She had been a DJ since upper secondary school. As an exchange student she’d won a big competition in Kansas, she told him.

Adam liked to think back to that night. Not just because of the sex. They’d eaten fried eggs and bacon afterwards. During the wedding speech two years later, several people had hinted at the same thing: Adam should thank his lucky stars Iris had picked him, she was in another league. She still worked as a DJ a couple of times a year, and would take time off from her job as an optician to perform at gigs abroad. Her set consisted of Bollywood, Bangla, house and hip-hop, and Iris harboured a surprisingly strong dislike for other genres, something which limited the offers she received. She was big in Bangladesh, was how she used to put it.

‘Pussyfaces,’ Iris continued. ‘They sit here in the cafes in Grünerløkka drinking red wine and reading *Dag & Tid* and...’ She ran out of words. ‘Pussyfaces. I’m from Oslo Vest. But I use pussyface as a swearword, don’t I?’

‘Yes, unfortunately.’

‘Pussyface, bloody pussyfaces.’

‘There, there, darling. The balcony doors are open.’

‘West Norwegians, do you know what they’re good at? They have a formidable ability to suck the joy out of everything.’

‘My dad grew up in west Norway.’

‘Yes... and? Your point being?’

Adam felt he ought to defend his father, but he was too happy for the love Iris had shown in attacking the old man, and instead he smiled resignedly.

‘Pussyfaces,’ Iris said.

‘Mum?’ Emma stood in the kitchen doorway.

Adam could see Iris blushing. ‘I’m just messing about.’

‘Am I allowed to say pussyface, too?’ Emma said.

Iris turned to look at her. ‘That goes without saying, my girl. If the occasion demands it.’

‘Don’t listen to Mum.’

‘But there’s one thing you’re never allowed to say, Emma,’ Iris said.

‘Yes?’

‘Oslo village.’

Emma gave her mum a questioning look. ‘Is that a real thing?’

‘No.’ Iris smiled. ‘It’s something people who come from actual villages use to tell people from the capital that they shouldn’t think they’re anything special. That in reality, people from the country, or even better, people from western Norway, represent the creation of all wealth in Norway. Because they have a few shipyards or factories or smelting plants or God-knows-what. While those of us who live here in Oslo, we just mess about, work in advertising or shuffle papers in an office.’

‘Like Dad?’

‘Dad?’

‘He sits in an office shuffling papers, doesn’t he?’

‘Now listen here, Emma. Dad is working on a book that will be about people who are actually having a hard time in the society we live in. People with little money. People who—’

‘We’ll see about that,’ Adam interrupted.

‘In contrast to people in the villages who live in big houses and complain about how we drink Italian coffee and put on airs and graces,’ Iris continued, before sniggering: ‘Oslo village, my arse.’

‘Is that as bad as saying Facebook?’ Emma said.

Iris got up and wrapped her arms around her daughter. ‘You certainly are my daughter.’

Adam saw Emma mouth the word quietly while she looked at him: ‘Pussyface.’ He rolled his eyes at her in return. The church bells had stopped ringing.

‘Being a representative of good taste is the price one must pay for growing up with a French balcony,’ Adam said.

Iris let go of Emma and smiled at him. ‘*You* grew up with a French balcony.’

*

The alarm clock mercilessly tore him from his dream at ten to five. He was nauseous when he showered, nauseous when he got dressed, nauseous when he ate breakfast, half a slice of bread and a cup of coffee. The entire block of flats was silent as a graveyard. The streets were empty. He was practically the only person on the tram to Jernbanetorget. At the metro station there were a few more people, but not many. He took the eastbound Number 3 train. Thirteen stops to Mortensrud. He was tired, cold and lonely. Every time the doors slid open, it got even colder, and as often as not, nobody got on.

The Kiwi supermarket was not far from the station. He stopped on the platform to take in the fresh morning air and collect himself. He was ready. His first shift.

He smiled at the sun and breathed in for the third time, like he had seen on the YouTube video: in through the nose, out through the mouth, after which he said what he was supposed to say: I. Am. Here. Now.

Getting a job in a shop had turned out to be considerably more difficult than Adam had expected. Prior to the first interview at the Rema 1000 in Brobekk he had been so confident. The manager of the shop was a young woman. Were Adam to guess her age, he would have said twelve.

‘Nice to meet you,’ she said, shook his hand and gave him a smile, before directing him past the deposit bottles to an office with a dead plant on the desk. ‘We actually don’t use this room,’ she said, without offering any explanation as to why it was still chosen for his interview. ‘So nice that you want to work with us.’ She was obviously one of these of said ‘nice’ about everything.

‘Yes,’ Adam said. ‘Thanks for calling me in for an interview.’

She smiled. Short blonde hair, which Adam thought made her look like the pretty girl in the sit-com that he couldn’t remember the name of.

‘Can you tell me a little about yourself?’ she started, and Adam looked at her. *Really? Tell me a little about yourself? Wasn’t he too old for that sort of thing?* He tried to sound energetic when he started: ‘I mean, I...’ He had prepared himself, but he suddenly realised that he had no words. It was as though everything evaporated. A sense of panic made him smile stupidly. He didn’t know what had happened, but his words had abandoned him. His head was one great big, desolate landscape. He looked at the manager of the shop. ‘I am..’ His lips trembled, as they occasionally did when he had to talk to strangers without being able to resort to small talk.

‘You don’t have to be nervous,’ she said, a little child trying to comfort him, he thought.

He took a breath and feigned a big smile. ‘I have a daughter. She’s fourteen. And it can be a little... at that age...’ Adam regretted it. The woman in front of him was considerably closer to Emma in age than to him. ‘No, but she is really great, she is, I mean. Clever and conscientious.’ *Why was he talking about Emma?* ‘Sometimes we worry that she is a little *too* nice, if you know what I mean?’ *God. Was he still talking?* ‘My wife and I,’ he said. ‘I’m married.’ He shut his eyes. *I’m sure she’s incredibly interested in that, Adam.*

‘What kind of schooling do you have?’ She cocked her head, as though she felt sorry for him. *Schooling? He didn’t bloody-well have schooling, he had an education.* ‘Yes, after sixth form. Secondary school,’ he corrected himself, ‘I took a couple of entry-level courses at university here in Oslo.’

She looked uncertain.

‘I guess they’re not called entry-level courses anymore. I don’t actually know what they’re called now. I should probably know that. But they were worth twenty credits, if that means anything to you. Or maybe they call them study points now?’ He took another deep breath.

She smiled. ‘What did you study?’

Adam knew that he didn’t want to tell her. He glanced at the plant. A poinsettia, maybe. ‘It...’ He returned the smile. ‘History of Ideas and Literary Criticism.’

‘Oh, right,’ she said. She made a note. ‘History of Ideas. Literary Criticism.’

‘Yes,’ he confirmed, as though he regretted it. ‘And then I took a semester of Middle Eastern Studies.’

Middle Eastern Studies, she wrote.

‘And then you wrote down that you’re an author?’ Her voice brightened up with that word.

‘Yes.’

‘That’s so exciting.’

‘Well, I don’t know about that,’ he said, feeling flattered. ‘But for the past ten years, yes, my primary occupation has been writing books.’

‘What kind of books?’

‘A collection of short stories. Two novels. This and that.’

‘What kind of novels?’

‘I’m not sure how to answer that.’

‘Crime novels?’

‘No.’ The answer was a little too quick and a little too vigorous.

‘Science fiction?’

‘No.’

‘Vampires?’

Was she messing with him? ‘No.’

‘More grown-up?’ she said with a laugh.

He laughed with her. ‘Less interesting.’

‘Oh, don’t say that,’ she said, and he was struck by the thought that he was sitting in the Rema 1000 in Brobekk, being consoled about his books by a twelve-year-old shop manager. ‘Everyone is insecure about what they do, isn’t that always the way? What’s that quote...?’ She looked at him.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Monsters are not under your bed. They are in your head.’

Adam nodded. ‘That’s true. That’s very true. *They are in your head,*’ he repeated.

The store manager looked terribly pleased at having remembered the quote, or was she thinking about what it meant, because she was quite for a while before collecting herself. ‘So why do you want to work here?’

‘I like working with people,’ he said as planned. ‘Sitting cooped up in the office spinning tales can make you a little dotty.’

He’d thought she would laugh at that but she didn’t.

‘About things which, generally speaking, most people aren’t particularly interested in,’ he added, still with no laughter from the manager. ‘And there aren’t a lot of jingling coins to be had from writing like that, there really aren’t.’ *Jingling coins?*

‘Have you worked at a till before?’

‘No, to be honest, I haven’t.’

‘You haven’t worked in a shop?’

‘No, I can’t really say that I have, apart from a week of work experience in year eight at school. I worked in a record shop at Gunerius Shopping Centre. A record shop...’ He stopped, uncertain whether he had to explain what a record shop was, but stopped himself, mostly because too much time had passed. ‘Do they still do work experience?’ he added instead, out of a kind of desperation.

‘But you like people?’ she said.

‘Yes, I do.’ He felt a need to rein himself in. ‘I love people,’ he said, and immediately sensed that he had gone too far.

Despite the disastrous interview, Adam was convinced that he would get the job in Brobekk. Fuck, he was a highly educated, stable family man in his forties. They must dream about people like him coming in and applying for jobs. They should already be calling him on the bus ride home to make sure he doesn't choose something else. All things considered, a certain gratitude would have been appropriate, he'd thought, unfortunately not merely in jest, when several days had passed without him hearing from the twelve-year-old girl. He applied for another job at the Europris in Stovner Shopping Centre, but he didn't hear from them either, just received a standard rejection email. From the Coop Extra in Korsvoll he didn't even get that. At the Rema in Ullernåsen he noticed their disappointment the moment they met him.

To be honest, Adam didn't take the rejections very well. With Iris, he made fun of the managers who had interviewed him, and in his explanations, Adam emphasised all the things he believed obviously placed him far above these individuals, without necessarily rattling them off, but they were things Adam thought made him the person he was: the books he'd read, the European cities he'd visited, the fountains he knew and the centuries they were built in, the artists he knew by name, the significance of William of Ockham to the philosophy of science, the fact that he knew there was something called the philosophy of science, the galleries he had visited, old French films, Marshall Aid, the political development of our age, and he could go on, right up until he ended on the trait which he believed truly characterised him as a person: the ability to see value in everyone.

In good moments, or in a rage, Adam sometimes considered his middle-class background to be a superpower. Whereas Aquaman could communicate telepathically with aquatic life, and Antman could shrink to the size of an insect in his battle against crime, Adam could step into any room, in just about any context whatsoever, with any sort of people, and manage just fine. He had the language. He had the ability to seamlessly adapt to any sociolect the conversations were conducted in. He could slip from east to west in the city, depending on who he talked to, take into account gender, profession and class, without him even realising that it was happening. Rightly or wrongly, Adam considered this trait to be an ability of the middle class. Another ability was his accommodating attitude, a power this superhero's enemies would probably characterise as ingratiating behaviour. Nonetheless: as Middleclassman, Adam had the ability to know what other people wanted to hear and what role they wanted him to take on. With a finely-tuned mind, he sensed every change of mood in the room, could quickly apologise, hurry off and step in with a helping hand wherever it might be needed. Catlike, he could accommodate their every need.

So why, why had they not called him to offer him a job? Who in the world did they prefer over him?

Iris provided him with the answer. Clearly they were sceptical about a white forty-six-year-old applying for a job as a shop assistant. Especially when he answered honestly to the questions about his education: a one-semester course, two entry-level courses at university, in history of philosophy and literary criticism, before explaining that his primary occupation for the past ten years had been as an author. 'It won't take long before assigning someone like you the job of emptying the bottle deposit machine gets unpleasant,' she said. 'Get the professor to hang condoms on the rack.'

It had made him laugh far too much, so relieved to hear her explanation that allowed him to retain his honour.

So before his interview at the Kiwi in Mortensrud, he changed strategy. He would try not to lie directly, but if it became necessary, he would. After all, he was working on the side of good, something he had joked to Iris about when they had discussed his course of action for the latest interview. He wouldn't mention the book project (he hadn't done so in the other interviews, either, mostly out of shyness, maybe, but also out of a kind of respect. At least that was what Adam had convinced himself.) He had reached the conclusion that too much honesty would probably influence the treatment he received, and therefore tarnish the experience and make it less valuable to his research. He wouldn't mention that he was going to quit in a month, either.

Iris was the one who had come up with the detail that had succeeded in toppling his new strategy of secrecy. She had turned down the ridiculously loud music she was listening to and said: 'Don't you think they Google people they're going to interview? Then they'll find out who you are.'

'There are a lot of Adam Berghs in the world.' Adam knew that from Googling his name almost daily, until his psychologist had pointed out that it probably wasn't the wisest thing to do. 'In the USA, alone,' he said.

'Yes, you're probably right.'

'Still, maybe I could spell my name differently. Just to be safe. Add an 'h' to Berg, for example. Bergh.' He immediately liked the thought.

'Bergh?' Iris said, pronouncing the h. 'That's not exactly a working class version of your name.'

Adam had looked at her reproachfully.

'Just sayin',' she said.

The manager at Mortensrud was a young man who had introduced himself as Ali Mujahedin, Adam thought, but that couldn't have been right. Adam shook his hand, said 'Adam Bergh,'

and was shown in to a ridiculously narrow office with no windows, with a plain door that led out to the shop and the trolleys. The room showed signs of not belonging to anyone. There was just a table and two chairs. A water cooler and some old paper cups that the manager cleared away in a hurry when he came in. After a brief introductory chat, the young manager asked Adam what he thought he could introduce to his branch of Kiwi. Adam should have had a good answer for this, but he didn't. 'Experience,' he replied unsurely after a while.

'Have you worked in a shop before?'

'No, I haven't. I was thinking more along the lines of life experience. That it could be an advantage to have someone on the team who...' He was pleased to have worked in the word *team* but now he hesitated because he realised that he was in danger of offending the manager during the first interview. '... is a little older than the others.' He thought he resolved it nicely but the manager didn't look particularly impressed. 'Sunniva is older than you. Iqra is probably about your age.'

Adam couldn't think of any response to that.

The manager smiled. 'What have you done previously?'

'Previously... ?' Adam looked up. 'I've done a bit of everything. I worked at the post office for a while.' That was on Saturdays when he was a student at senior secondary. 'I worked as a courier at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.' (work experience, Year 8.) 'And in a record shop at the shopping centre.' Another week of work experience, because he had changed schools.)

The manager seemed more satisfied with that. 'How many hours can you work?'

'As many as you need.'

'Evenings and weekends, too?'

'Yes.' Adam had thought about this in advance. He could manage it for a month. 'But I have a fourteen-year-old daughter, and on Wednesdays I have to drop her off at dance class...' He didn't know why that slipped out of him. Adam looked up and thought better of it. 'But I'm sure I can arrange it so my wife can do that.'

Adam walked towards the Kiwi with determination. Blue sky, barely six-thirty. Clear as an egg, he thought to himself, and pictured a cute little beak pecking its way out of its shell. The sun was shining. He liked Mortensrud, he realised. The local health centre was named Chanterelle, little things like that.

Adam walked purposefully towards the automatic doors he had walked through for the job interview. The problem, when he reached them, was that they didn't open. He took a step closer, so that he was standing right up by the glass, stood there for a moment, tried applying more pressure on the front foot, in case there were sensors in the asphalt that measured his weight, he didn't actually believe that, but he didn't know what else to do. Then he tried again, pressed his foot on the pavement, leaned onto it, so that he was practically standing on one foot, his face centimetres from the glass, before despondently taking a step back. Nobody had said anything about an employee entrance, shouldn't someone have arranged to meet him if there was a different entrance?

He spotted a woman, Somalian, if he had to guess. 'Do you know where the employee entrance?'

She looked at him, and he was immediately struck by the thought: how does this look, a middle-aged white man asking the first dark-skinned person he runs into if she knew where the service entrance was?

'If you don't know, I understand, I mean,' he said with embarrassment.

She continued to look at him sceptically. Then she leaned forward a little and said: 'Pardon?'

'I'm just wondering if you know where... if you've seen where the employees go in?'

She shook her head and walked away, and Adam smiled broadly and said to her back: 'Thank you!'

Embarrassed, but also somewhat annoyed at her rudeness, Adam slinked around to the back of the shop. Next to three rubbish bins, he found a door, and hesitantly he pressed the handle down and pushed, first cautiously, then put his shoulder into it, but the door wouldn't budge. He started back towards the front door, but stopped before he had made it halfway. Indecisive and full of doubt, he returned to the bins, tried the door once more, nothing. Then he saw a woman, and although she wasn't wearing a Kiwi uniform, she was at least wearing work clothes. She was carrying two bin bags, she was white and of a similar age to him.

'Do you know if this is the entrance to the Kiwi?' he called out.

Not content with simply placing her bags down, she dropped them on the ground, as though it were his fault she was carrying them in the first place. She studied him, almost like some kind of customs officer or border guard, and Adam wondered if she really thought she

was in any position to be suspicious of him. Scruffy and rather dishevelled in appearance as she was, after all.

‘The entrance is at the front,’ she said curtly.

‘I don’t mean the usual one,’ he answered in a loud voice. ‘The one for the people who work here.’

She sighed with her whole body. ‘Yes, that’s the one.’

‘But it’s locked.’

‘Yes.’

He looked at her, waited for her to continue, but she just grabbed one of the bin bags and swung it into the bin before looking at him again, still without saying anything. This time Adam couldn’t be bothered to say thank you, and he stood staring at the filthy entrance. Then—more out of resignation than anything else—he pulled on the door, and it slid open as though nothing had happened. Adam slipped inside without turning round, cushioned the door so it would close without a sound, as though his sudden liteness would cancel out all the fuss from before. As though these panther-like movements were what showed his true character.

Adam entered a corridor, by no means convinced he was proceeding in the right direction. And even though he hoped to find his way, and even though he was worried about being late on his first day, something inside him also hoped that the corridor would be a dead end, so that—with a hint of good conscience—he could leave, stroll back to the station and take the metro home, make a cup of coffee and sit down on the balcony and laugh at himself, at the absurdity of it all, and at everything he had already accomplished this morning. The last thing he wanted was to bump into someone. At least if he was able to find his own way in, and end up the locker room standing tall, as the new, pleasant—though slightly older—colleague.

‘Heyy!’ A fit young man suddenly appeared in front of him. Swedish, apparently, Adam could hear it at once, but he didn’t like it, without knowing why. ‘Have you made a wrong turn?’ The man smiled. It was his gibberish mix of languages that awoke an instinctive doubt within Adam. Why didn’t he just speak Swedish? Why was he standing there putting on airs like that?

Adam managed to pull himself together and replied. ‘No,’ he answered. ‘I’m starting work here.’

‘Are you starting heeer?’

Adam nodded.

The Swede offered him his hand. ‘Torsby.’

‘Adam.’

‘The staff changing room is in here.’

Did he think Norwegians rolled their r's like that? Did he have a speech impediment? Adam smiled uncertainly. 'Thanks. It wasn't easy to find.'

'Aha.' Torsby, as he apparently called himself, opened the door to the changing room. Another young man was standing there, already naked from the waist up, and with nothing to be ashamed of. 'Bro,' the Swede called out, and immediately they were hugging each other the way Adam had noticed young people do, by leaning forward with their hands gripped between them, standing side to side, almost shoulder to shoulder. Even though he liked the version—it showed affection but avoided stomach on stomach contact—Adam knew that he could never hug someone like that, he would look ridiculous. He guessed that the two guys were in their early twenties.

'Say hey to Adam.' The way Torsby said it, his name sounded like an internal organ, Adam thought. He didn't catch the other guy's name, Kabir-something, but Adam said hello, smiling and awkward, like he was his cousin from the country. Then he took a look around.

'Make yourself at home, Adam,' Torsby said, like he was the team captain. Adam nodded with an even more sheepish grin before sitting down, then sliding down a couple of spots so as not to appear to keen. There were rows of tall, narrow lockers and a wooden bench to sit on.

'There are probably some uniforms in the bag.' Kabir-something pointed at a thin white plastic bag. Adam got up, went over and looked inside. Green trousers and a green-checked shirt. He returned to his spot, laid out the new clothes next to him on the bench. The others were already finished changing. Adam would have preferred to avoid getting undressed in front of them, but he started to undo his belt, buttoned down his fly and removed his trousers, one leg at a time, before hanging them on a hook in the locker. He grabbed the green Kiwi trousers and stepped into them. Not a flattering look, not at all. The button dug into his stomach. But he hurried to pull the shirt over his head, without unbuttoning more than the top buttons, hung it up and put on the rest of his uniform in virtually a single movement. He tucked the shirt in, even though he would have preferred to leave it out, but he assumed that was not allowed. He tried to preserve his dignity by looking at the absurdity of it all, and he ended up thinking of the green-clad daughter of the troll mountain king in Peer Gynt, but instead of cheering him up, it made him feel lonely.

Adam caught the smell of beer dregs from the bags of empty bottle returns in the storeroom. It was still only quarter to seven, but despite everything, the bitter stench strengthened his resolve. It reminded him of the times in his childhood he had gone to Jordal Amfi and collected bottles and pucks from under the bleachers. Ice hockey was an eastside sport. He hadn't done it many times, maybe just once or twice, but the memory nonetheless

helped him. He could do this, he smiled. He hung his reading glasses from the cord around his neck. He could do this.

‘This is Adam, he’s new here,’ the manager said to the others working the same shift: two girls wearing hijabs, a woman who appeared to be Nigerian or something, a ginger-haired white guy, Torsby, standing there grinning at him, and Kabir-something. Adam now noticed that he was an exceptionally handsome young man who—if Adam were asked to guess—had roots in India. Adam shook hands with everyone, something which apparently was not *comme il faut*, and because he caught a whiff of surprise as soon as he started, it disrupted him enough that he failed to catch a single name. When he got to Torsby, he should have stopped, if for no other reason than he had already met him, but now Adam couldn’t do anything other than introduce himself to every one of them in the same way, including Kabir-something, and when he stood with this handsome man’s hand in his, he could barely remember his own name: ‘Uh...’ He smiled stupidly. ‘Adam.’

‘I know,’ Kabir-something said. The scene made Adam worry that his new colleagues would assume he was gay. That didn’t really bother him, he had loads of gay friends (once in his twenties he had even seen a gay porn film with another man due to a big misunderstanding), but Adam sensed a vague concern that being gay was a sexual preference that might lead to him being frozen out in a workplace environment that relied heavily on immigrants.

On Mondays, the new stock arrived. Adam’s first job was to carry in boxes of fruit and vegetables and fill the shelves wherever needed. He shared this task with Bisma—Adam had eventually managed to catch her name—she was one of the girls wearing a hijab. Much to Adam’s relief, and surprise, if he was being honest, she talked incessantly while she worked. She was going to be a nurse. She had been on a show with a performer that Adam had never heard of. She said he was big in the Muslim youth scene. She said he was a YouTuber, actually, that his videos had millions of views, everything from touching family moments to parodies and pranks. She liked Park Theatre, where he performed. She liked cats better than dogs, what about him? She liked that they had a mind of their own, and then Adam had thought of a song by Iggy Pop called ‘I Wanna Be Your Dog’, but he hadn’t told her that. ‘I like watching cat videos on the internet,’ he said. Otherwise he said very little. More than anything, Adam was ready to burst with pride at the fact that a Muslim teenager, a girl at that, thought it was worth her while to chat with him, even though he had a suspicion that Bisma thought it was worth her while to talk to anyone.

Suddenly he heard Bisma laugh. ‘Working hard?’

‘What?’ But then he noticed. Despite having carried the conversation continuously, she had managed to put away all the stock on her side. Adam had not even made it halfway, and this despite him making a real effort to pick up the pace. This was the Krystof episode all over again. ‘I’ll help,’ she said, before breaking out in laughter again.

‘Sorry,’ Adam said.

‘You’ll learn eventually. I was slow at first, too.’

Adam smiled at her words of comfort, though he was quite sure they weren’t true. ‘But I’m allergic to cats,’ he said.

‘Are you? Oh, such a shame!’

‘But I still like them better than dogs. I’m scared of dogs.’

She laughed again. ‘My dad is, too.’

‘Is he?’ Adam didn’t take it to heart that her father was the first thing that came to mind.

‘He’s scared of all animals, pretty much.’

Now it was Adam’s turn to laugh. His fingers were cold from stocking up the refrigerated display cases. ‘Flies?’

‘Oh, insects are by far the worst thing he knows! And he grew up in a village where there were tigers.’

‘It’s okay to be scared of tigers, I think,’ Adam said.

‘Yes. And elephants.’

‘Yes.’

They were almost finished. ‘Is it possible to be allergic to elephants?’ she asked.

Adam got to run a till in the middle of the day, when there weren't many customers. He wore a big badge on his chest that said he was in training. 'Then people won't get so upset when you make mistakes or if you're slow,' Mujahedin said. But it felt good when he sat down in the chair with the worn upholstery and placed his hand in front of the optical light that started the conveyor belt. He had never seen a shop from that perspective before. He had his own little booth, which to him felt like his own semi-private area. A cup full of rubber bands. Kitchen roll and an empty water bottle. A box of plastic bags. A tobacco cupboard, condoms on a rack to his right. Chewing gum in a box at the edge of the counter, carrot batons on offer. He leaned back in the chair, which groaned under his weight. So here he was, he thought, a bona fide author working the checkout at Kiwi. Hell Yeah!

Adam made a lot of mistakes. He constantly had to ring the bell under the counter to ask someone with a supervisor card to come over and swipe it.

'Sorry,' Adam said when they stood in front of him, and at first his colleagues simply smiled, but on day two it seemed to Adam that the smiles were stiffer, and on day three they were gone. He could see that the manager was wondering if he had managed to hire a man who couldn't even run an automated till, even without the pressure of a growing queue, but on the fourth day things went better. Adam only had to ask for help three times, and he managed to get the bottle return machine working when the alarm sounded, by changing the collection bag all by himself. He didn't get stressed by fruit and veg that had to be weighed, either, and didn't panic when a barcode failed to scan, often because of a tiny wrinkle or condensation, so he had to find the product in the booklet and manually enter a whole swath of digits in order to register the sale. He put on the glasses that were hanging around his neck, squinted at the pictures and entered in the numbers.

'Remember to greet every customer at the till,' Mujahedin reminded him, still somewhat annoyed despite his progress. He stood with his legs astride, probably because he thought that it gave him a masculine authority that compensated for his small stature. 'It's... ' Now he locked eyes with Adam, who realised that he had to complete the sentence and repeat what the manager had said on several occasions: 'It's policy,' Adam said.

'Precisely,' the young manager said, and Adam wondered who the hell this uppity kid actually thought he was, but he kept quiet, just dragged the products past the scanner, roughly and impatiently, so that as often as not, he had to repeat the movements several times before the beep sounded.

Kabir-something was in the till opposite his. 'Don't mind him,' he said. Adam shrugged. There were no customers. When there were, they just had to take shit without being able to comment on the unreasonableness to anyone. Like an hour later:

‘Hi,’ Adam said, as policy required. The customer was a man of his age. He didn’t answer. He was not on his mobile or busy with anything, he just didn’t return his greeting. ‘That will be 118 kroner,’ Adam said politely when the products were entered in. The man slid his card into the terminal, waited, entered the four-digit code without saying a word, before he went to pack his products. ‘Would you like your receipt?’ Adam asked, as they were also instructed to do.

‘I asked for a bag.’

‘Yes, sorry,’ Adam said, even though the man hadn’t asked for a bag. ‘Here you are.’

The middle-aged customer threw his few items inside and left the shop.

‘Thanks for fucking nothing,’ Adam said.

Kabir-something laughed. But all of a sudden the manager was standing in front of him again. Adam sincerely hoped he had not been in his vicinity when he swore. Swearing was not exactly policy. But he just said: ‘Can you do a Saturday shift tomorrow?’

‘Evening shift?’ Adam thought about the party at Torsby’s.

‘No, opening shift.’

Kabir-something was still shaking his head in laughter when the manager left. ‘You’re funny,’ he said, taking a generous tone, which meant that above all it wasn’t pride Adam felt, but something less honourable: they were the ones treating him with understanding and indulgence, not the other way round, the way he had imagined it beforehand. And that bothered him more than he could admit. He was nobody here, and they all knew it, but they let him keep at it, which was even worse. Deep down he knew: they considered to be some kind of mascot.

The one thing Adam had not anticipated was how utterly exhausted he would be at the end of the day. Writing in the evenings was going to be a challenge. Already his thoughts came slower. His body ached from having been on his feet most of the day. His knees and lower back in particular. Over the course of the next few days he would have to find a pair of shoes that were a better cushion from the hard, tiled floor. He jotted it down in the notebook he kept beside the keyboard. But he also thought that it was good material, the exhaustion, and he picked up his phone to dictate, so that he could write it down another day. ‘The body,’ he started. ‘The body of a worker.’ He stopped the recording, reflected. ‘Pride and physique... Working title?’ There was a long pause while the tape played, then he continued: ‘Anyway, where was I? ... The body of a worker... Getting up early in the morning. Walking through the gates at the dock, the factory. Using the body. Feel a sense of camaraderie. Body and soul walking hand in hand... A real man used to be both fit and fair. Still an ideal, or have these (masculine) ideals floundered? We have jobs where we sit still—and think. Each and every one, on their own... weakened environment for a united struggle? Demand for everyone to be the architect of their own fortune.’

He put down the phone. He could definitely build on this. Then he checked his bank account for the third time that week. And suddenly the money had arrived. The absurd lump sum of 700 000 kroner lit up at him, alone in the in column. He had to take a breath. Good Lord.

Inspired, he picked up the phone again: ‘A beep for every product. Beep, beep, beep,’ he mimicked as Emma poked her head into the office. ‘What are you up to?’

Adam stopped the recording and turned towards her. ‘I’m working, my girl,’ he said with a big smile.

‘You’re sitting there saying beep... ?’

He continued to smile until she realised that she was meant to leave and shut the door behind her. Then Adam rewound, listened until he heard Emma’s *What are you up to?*, rewind again, and started the recording right after *Beep, beep, beep*, so that Emma’s interruption was erased. ‘Like a ventilator?’ he recorded. ‘The beeping stays in your head till late in the evening.’ The last bit wasn’t true, strictly speaking, but it sounded right. Then he continued with some key words: ‘The manager is a dolt, zealous supervision of productivity... Have to find out what Kabir is called, and Mujahedin... Check if they’re union (I haven’t been asked to join a union) ... Smells? ... Cheese... ’

He sniggered at the last bit. Jeez, was he ever tired. Still, the physical exhaustion felt good. It implied that he had done something useful, he thought. Adam got up with a little groan. Then he went to find Iris and sunk into the sofa next to her. ‘The money has arrived,’ he said.

‘700 000 kroner?’

‘So now it’s just a matter of not fucking up.’

Iris smiled. ‘That’s the spirit,’ she said ironically, but he didn’t have the energy to answer. In Adam’s mind, it was his money, not hers. Even though they had joint finances, it was his.

‘So, *work party with your workmates*, then?’

He didn’t like the way she said it, like she was making fun of them. ‘Yes.’

‘But otherwise you’re free tomorrow, right? I’ll make a good Saturday breakfast for you. Fresh croissants, an omelette with roast beef.’

Adam sent her an reproachful look. ‘The party is not work.’

‘I didn’t mean that. But you weren’t overly eager to go.’

He sighed, discouraged with her, but also content to be able to say: ‘And by the way, Saturday is a work day, I’m afraid.’

Iris looked at him. ‘But you’ve already worked five days. Two night shifts. A double shift, even.’

Adam shrugged. ‘It is what it is.’

‘Aren’t you tired?’

‘Hell yeah I’m tired.’

‘Poor you, my darling husband. When do you start tomorrow?’

‘The shop opens at seven.’

Adam appreciated her concern, but what remained with him was the thought of the parochialism she expressed. She really had no clue about the life other people in their country lived, even though she saw them every day. She didn’t care. Like all the friends they knew, they lived in a bubble of prosperity, shielded by ignorance. And Gunnar and his companions? Above all they loved the struggle, marching in the streets, challenging the police and shouting slogans. They could argue about anything. Full of arguments and ideology, but more interested in themselves than everyone else, when all was said and done. They were demagogues without demos.

Adam was more satisfied than angry. He was close to making a breakthrough, he felt. Fit and fair. He reconstructed his entire character. Because Adam Berg was the one who got up and went to work. Adam Bergh, in fact.

‘I think I might be right about Emma,’ Iris said.

‘You’re always right, aren’t you?’ he said with a yawn. ‘That’s how I’ve understood it.’

She ignored him. 'I think she may be a lesbian, or at least undecided when it comes to her sexual orientation.'

'Really?'

'Yes, I think so. She wrote a new essay at school, and it's also about heteronormativity.'

'Did she use that word?'

'Yes, actually.'

Adam shut his eyes. He couldn't say what made him more proud: the fact that they had raised a daughter who knew what heteronormativity was, or how well he had tackled the fact that she might be a lesbian. Obviously it was possible his reaction was due to exhaustion or a need to feel more successful, but he felt that her potential lesbianism reflected well on him, and in the frazzled state he found himself in, he almost felt like Emma should be thanking him. Besides, he was 700 000 kroner richer. He had worked late shifts and double shifts for the first time in his life. When Iris asked him if he was still as useless as before, he was already asleep.

It was not a sense of solidarity, fairness and character building that Adam was filled with when he dragged himself out of bed at ten to five in the morning, and not when he sat down in the clattering, empty train carriage. Why they opened at seven on Saturdays was a riddle to Adam. Hardly any customers came before ten o'clock, just a few with young children who had presumably already been up for several hours, and a couple of drunkards. They had been told to be extra careful that the drunks didn't steal, but that was one of those orders Adam did not intend to obey. But he had to admit, they were annoying, the drunks, the way they never knew how much they had to pay, just stuck their swollen, purple hands into their pockets and pulled out some coins along with bits of dust, or dropped them on the floor, so that Adam had to crawl around on all fours while the drunk stood there laughing.

Towards late morning the first customers arrived in training gear, those who were headed for the woods, either to go jogging, or if the clothes were a little tighter, cycling. Adam smiled to himself when he saw them wandering around the shop, still wearing cycle helmets and specialist shoes that clicked against the tiles, on the prowl for something healthy to lunch on.

Afterwards arrived those customers who hardly wore any clothes at all. Those who had been out on the town the previous night and now compensated for all the dressing-up by shuffling around in ill-fitting shorts or pyjama bottoms, flip flops or wellies and a loose-fitting T-shirt. For the most part they bought bacon and eggs, expensive juice, some bought buns that could be heated up, and liver pâté, imported berries or melons. Mortensrud differed surprisingly little from Grünerløkka in that respect.

Adam thought it was particularly strange to work in the shop when other people had their day off. First and foremost because it was so obvious that none of the people loafing around in the air-conditioned shops realised that he and his colleagues were actually working. They were like invisible servants, he would later jot that down in his notebook. People didn't mistreat them, they didn't pester them; they just failed to notice them. They were completely invisible to the customers, even though they were wearing bright-green uniforms.

Towards the afternoon the shop gradually filled, and Saturday at five-thirty-half an hour before beer sales ended—the Kiwi was like standing at the gates of Hell.

'Adam!' It was Mujahedin, who would obviously work twenty-four hours a day if he could. 'You're needed at the till!'

Adam had been afraid of this. Kabir-something had called in sick that morning, so they were down one, and now there was maximum pressure at the tills. 'Okay,' Adam simply said. He looked at the queues in horror and sneaked behind the till at the far left. He used his car to log on. For a moment he gathered his courage, took a breath, then shouted: 'Open till!'

Immediately several of the other queues broke up, and people streamed towards him, rushing to get to the front. Adam tried to work calmly and systematically. ‘Hi,’ he said and smiled. He found the barcode on one of the beers in the six-pack, wiped off the condensation and dragged it past the scanner. When that didn’t work, he tried another bottle, or grabbed his reading glasses from the cord around his neck and typed in the numbers manually while attempting to ignore the growing queue. He scanned bread, milk, cured mutton sausages, shredded mozzarella, called for Marlboro Gold from one of the other tills, snus and beer. At one point he had to twist a bottle, and had to lift the six-pack in a slightly odd manner in order to scan it, and accidentally dropped it on the floor. It smashed against the tiles as though a bomb had exploded. Beer splattered over a few of the customers.

‘Oh, for fuck’s sake,’ the girl said, impatient to pay. Adam had been thinking of asking to see her ID, just to be on the safe side.

‘Sorry, sorry, sorry,’ Adam said.

‘Now I’m going to reek of beer at the party.’ Much to his surprise, Adam realised that she was genuinely furious.

‘Sorry,’ he repeated. He noticed the gazes from other customers in the queue, saw it stretching further into the shop than ever before. ‘Come on!’ someone shouted. ‘The clock is ticking!’

Adam noticed Torsby watching him from the other till, clearly discouraged that the old potato couldn’t keep up, thus making work more difficult for everyone else.

‘It’s ten to six!’ Someone chuckled and grinned. A kind of alliance was forming among the customers, united by a common enemy. And Adam suspected that his colleagues would line up behind them, given the choice. He could hear them say it in Torsby’s gibberish accent: *Yust take him out on the street and chute him point blank.*

He looked up at the young woman again. ‘Can you grab another one, and I’ll get this cleaned up in the meantime?’ he asked.

‘Me? You were the one who...’ She marched off like a sulking child. Adam grabbed the roll of kitchen paper from behind the till and forced himself out among the crowd of people, cleared up what was left of the six-pack, before hunching down, collecting the glass and spillage as best he could, and dragging everything along the floor into the booth where he sat. The girl returned and stood in a way that was meant to make it perfectly clear that she was drenched with beer, which she certainly wasn’t. ‘Would you like a bag?’ Adam asked.

‘I suppose I get a free one, now,’ she grumbled.

‘Of course,’ Adam said, already serving the next customer, but noticed how several customers from his queue moved to other queues. And then the till froze, and he had to ring the manager, and he came racing over, ran his card angrily, without a word.

‘Maybe you’re too old for this?’ a guy at the back of the queue said. Adam looked up in desperation, his reading glasses on his nose, and discovered that he was with a group of five young immigrant lads. ‘I think so, bro,’ one of his mates said. Adam was ashamed that the rage he had first felt, faded into disappointment at seeing that they were brown, to borrow a term his daughter used.

Bisma had taken a seat in the till across from him. She smiled at him and mouthed something with her lips. He couldn’t quite make out what she said, but it made him think of the man he saw in the crocodile costume on the ferry to Denmark. For a second it was as though he could feel the shaggy material against his cheek again and hear the voice: ‘It’ll be fine.’

On the train home, he almost started to cry. He was going home to get a little sleep, then off to the party at Torsby's. Just then, right after Ulsrud Station, his phone rang. Adam didn't recognise the number, but as always, he was powerless not to answer it.

'Is this Adam Berg?' he heard a woman ask, and Adam immediately was terrified that something had happened to his father.

'Yes...?'

'This is Maj Helen Blinkstad. I'm in charge of programming at the House of Literature in Oslo.'

'I see...?' Adam had never in his entire career as an author been invited to the House of Literature in his hometown, and a faint, bitter scepticism could be traced in his reply. 'I thought this might have something to do with my father,' Adam said. He was obviously too exhausted to ascertain what he should and should not say.

It didn't sound like she was listening anyway. 'Let me first congratulate you on being awarded the grant. It is an incredibly exciting project,' she said, and when he didn't reply, she added: 'At least, we think so.'

'Thank you so much,' he replied, so exhausted that he was moved. 'I think so, too.' He smiled to himself. A surprising outside interest for his own work almost always put him in a better mood.

'And important,' the woman in the other end said.

'Yes...' He reminded himself that he had actually been working at the till in Kiwi today, what had other people he knew been doing? 'So you're working on a Saturday, too?' he said.

'I hope you don't mind me calling?' she apologised, 'sometimes things can get a little backed up,' and he laughed indulgently: 'Yes, yes, I'm just on my way home from work now. I've been working the till at Kiwi all day.' He said it as straightforward as possible. 'For the purposes of research,' he added, obviously he didn't want her to think that he *had* to work at Kiwi in order to make ends meet.

'How exciting!' she exclaimed.

Adam took a breath and felt a tinge of importance and fame.

'So we were wondering if you would come out and talk about it,' the woman said.

'Yes... yes... I'd like that. When were you thinking,' he added, in order to sound professional.

'We were thinking two weeks from now. If that's doable.'

Adam waited a little. Then he said: 'Yes, that should be possible.'

'Lovely. The Wednesday of that week. That's when we run what we call our 'Topical Soiree'. Maybe you've heard about it...?'

‘Yes...’ *Who the hell came up with the name ‘Topical Soiree’?* he smiled to himself.

‘It’s where we take a sneak peek at the books we’re most excited about. And we would like you to read something from. If you have something already. It doesn’t have to be long. But something. As well as a conversation, of course.’

Adam nodded. ‘Yes, I understand. Read something.’

‘But of course we can talk about it in more detail closer to the time. The conversation will be part of this series we’re running, about outsiderdom. That fits in, right? A kind of sneak peek into your work. People are really excited about it.’

He heard her getting nervous that he wasn’t saying more than one word at a time, but he didn’t think he needed to concern himself with such things. He didn’t need to be liked. ‘It was really great what you said, I don’t remember where I saw it,’ she added. ‘That the world is going off its hinges.’

‘Thanks,’ he said, shyly. ‘But that was Hamlet, in fact.’

‘What was?’

‘The quote.’

‘That the world is going off its hinges?’

‘Yes, well he says that time is out of...’ Adam stopped and took a breath. ‘Anyway. It has. “The world.”’

‘Yes, it’s practically burning up at the moment,’ she said, and Adam sensed it: They considered him fearless now. If a fire broke out, they would say to one another: *No need to panic, Adam will be here soon to save us.* And during good spells, to him it felt like: he had it in him to carry people out of a burning building.

‘We’re looking forward to it,’ she said.

Adam noticed the smell of beer. It was from the hand holding the mobile up to his ear. ‘That’s great,’ he said.