

WINNER  
THE GOLDEN  
LAURELS

# THE CHILDREN

IDA  
JESSEN



# THE CHILDREN

IDA  
JESSEN

Translated from the Danish  
By Don Bartlett



First published in Australia in 2012 by  
UWA Publishing  
Crawley, Western Australia 6009  
www.uwap.uwa.edu.au

UWAP is an imprint of UWA Publishing  
a division of The University of Western Australia



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
WESTERN AUSTRALIA  
*Achieve International Excellence*

This book is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the *Copyright Act 1968*, no part may be reproduced by any process without written permission. Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

Copyright © 2009 by Ida Jessen  
Published by agreement with Leonhardt & Høier Literary Agency A/S, Copenhagen

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

English translation copyright © 2012 by Don Bartlett  
The translation has been sponsored by the Danish Arts Council Committee for Literature.

**THE DANISH ARTS FOUNDATION**

National Library of Australia  
Cataloguing-in-Publication data:

Jessen, Ida.  
The Children/Ida Jessen; translator, Don Bartlett.  
ISBN: 9781742584355 (pbk.)  
A823.4

Typeset in 11pt Bembo by Lasertype  
Printed by Griffin Press  
Cover photograph: Matthew Hall

# CONTENTS

PART I	1992–1999	1
PART II	THE YEARS 1999–2006	179
PART III	THE HIDDEN YEARS 2006–2007	269
	EPILOGUE	329



# PART I

1992–1999



# 1

In the middle of the afternoon on New Year's Eve, the dusk already gathering, a small, red Renault 5 was driving through the Naverslund scrubland, north-east of Hvium. It had just rained and the mist hung between the trees, hovering just above the ground, stationary.

'It can't be far now,' Solvej said. 'Søren Martinsen said once we'd passed Naverslund and taken the first road off to the right, we'd be there.'

'Good,' said her mother from the seat beside her, in the same encouraging voice she had used throughout the long journey from Helsingør. The dark tunnel of trees widened and a grey dome of sky appeared. The woods were soon behind them and they drove past a large, white two-storey farmhouse. Behind it were cowsheds and barns. The car headlamps swept across the windows. There wasn't a light in the imposing building, not even a yard lamp was lit.

'Over there. The road,' Solvej's mother said.

'Where?'



‘Right in front of you.’

Solvej slowed down.

‘Do you really think we should go down there?’

‘We can give it a try.’

It was a narrow dirt track, muddy, ploughed up by tractor wheels. It led downwards, with fields on one side and a hedgerow on the other. At the foot of the hill they crossed a stream, and from then on the track degenerated into total mire. Now they were back in the woods, with small, stunted trees, and the road rose steeply in the headlights.

‘I’m not sure we can get up that,’ Solvej said.

‘It’ll be fine,’ her mother answered. ‘Just get into second and go for it.’

They wormed their way forward. The car skidded from side to side, and Solvej laughed manically with both cheeks flushed, while her mother’s aged terrier whimpered on the rear seat. But once they had reached the crest of the hill they saw a light between the trees, and shortly afterwards they drove into the yard in front of a white house with red timbers. The lamp above the steps was lit. Otherwise everything was in darkness.

The car doors slammed in the silence and they were met by the fusty smell of trees and soil and fallen leaves. They had been travelling for seven hours and their limbs were stiff. Their heads buzzed with a vague, pent-up, tingling sensation.

‘Have you got the key?’ her mother asked.

‘It should be here.’

Solvej ran her hand along the doorframe. Then she remembered that Søren Martinsen had said he would leave it beside the steps. She rummaged among the leaves. There was a dark Christmas rose on either side of the front step. She had never seen such large, bushy specimens before. They must have been very old.

‘Here.’ She stood up, inserted the key in the lock, turned it and pushed open the door. To her surprise she felt some

warmth against her face. ‘I think he’s put the heating on,’ she said. ‘And I can smell wood smoke.’

They walked into the sitting room where there was a piano against the wall, between two windows. The wood-burning stove was lukewarm, and when they opened the doors there were still embers inside.

‘Well, how nice of him,’ Solvej said. ‘He must have dropped by to light it.’

‘Yes, that was really nice,’ her mother said, but Solvej didn’t think she sounded grateful enough.

All at once a wild hope welled up inside Solvej, dispelling her fatigue. It was a happiness that flared up with such haste it almost hurt. The warm room meant there was a place for her. Her lonely wanderings were over. She dropped her bag on the floor and began to race around lighting candles, scarcely able to believe her own eyes as she rounded the corner into the kitchen and saw a marble benchtop and a washing machine. The lamp gleamed in the curtain-less window. She leaned forward and tried to peer into the garden. But she saw nothing apart from her own wide-open eyes and her expectations, which burned in the same way that despair had done for so long. Everything was of the body: the sleeplessness, fear, shame, stress and now this overwhelming joy.

The house was one of Naverslund’s old forester dwellings, which had been rented out for a variety of purposes. Aarhus University had occupied it for a while, and most recently a teacher of yoga and music had stayed there for six months, who, from what Søren Martinsen had told her on the telephone, had been trying to find herself pupils. But it hadn’t worked out, and she had departed in great haste, leaving quite a few of her belongings behind. Solvej had been prepared for this, and it suited her fine, for, despite being a health visitor and having worked as a nurse for six years, she possessed nothing to speak of except clothes, books and a radio. She had constructed an existence and demolished it. That was as far as she had got.

The house was a mixture of luxury and stagnation. In the little hall there was a brick floor, worn down by a multitude of feet. There was a bathroom with a tub and an old-fashioned towel stand, and a washbasin rested on a marble tabletop. But the toilet bowl was rust-stained, and the water in the taps yellowish-brown. The bedroom was freezing cold. She left the door open for warm air to waft in and went upstairs. The whole of the upper floor was one large room with a chimney in the middle. At each end there was a glass pane, and outside lay the darkness, as black as coal. Under the steeply slanting ceiling there was a low IKEA sofa, and on the other side a mattress. A dining table, with leaves extended so that it could seat twelve, stood in the middle of the floor. She went back downstairs and found her mother in the kitchen running her hand over the bottoms of the pots and pans.

‘You start bringing the things in and I’ll see to the food,’ her mother said.

Outside, it struck Solvej how clean the air was. The leaves rustled beneath her feet, and a long, long way off, several kilometres in the distance, there was the barely audible drone of cars on the Viborg road. Raindrops were still dripping from the trees. But there was an overpowering sense of silence. She carried in the suitcases and bags and boxes. When she saw Christiane’s tiny red slippers at the top of one bag she put them on the shoe rack and then stopped dead in her tracks. That was where her mother found her.

‘Come into the warm,’ she said gently, closing the door to the yard. ‘You’ll get cold standing there.’

They ate. Solvej’s mother had brought homemade food with her. They shared a boiled lobster and afterwards they had fried pigeon, which her mother had warmed in a sauce. They drank wine. They hadn’t known whether there would be any pots in the house, but in fact it had everything. There was a large mahogany cupboard full of plates, knives, forks and glasses. Her mother had found a cloth to put on the table,

placed a Christmas rose in a little vase, and stuck a candle in the candlestick on the windowsill. Solvej had noticed, but was too tired to make a comment or say thank you. If her mother had not been there she would have eaten straight from the pot with a fork.

This was her new life. She didn't understand it. There was the little house, and around it a new life which she had to fight for. She knew nothing about it, though, other than that it would be hard and she was in the middle of the hard part now. Deep inside her body there was a need and it screamed, and she would have to silence it so that she could think and make plans.

She had never had it so hard before. But this was how it was. There was no choice.

After washing up, Solvej stretched out on the chaise longue in the corner. Her mother sat down on a chair with a book and Solvej lay observing her face in the light while the dog sighed in its sleep. Her mother turned the white pages under the lamp. It was half past nine. It would soon be too late to ring, she reflected, and then it occurred to her it wouldn't be possible anyway. One of her first actions had been to embark on a search for a telephone socket. She had also taken her own telephone out of one of the boxes and plugged it in, but of course there was no connection. She had to set up an account. Why hadn't she thought of that before moving in? Her body felt heavy and sluggish, but at the same time inside she was buzzing. Her mother cleared her throat and raised her head. She seemed to be listening for something in the house or in the woods. But then she returned to her book.

'I think I'll make a cup of tea,' she said a moment later. She got up, and soon afterwards the kettle was singing on the stove, a tin was opened and the cupboard door creaked open and closed. It was as though her mother was trying to speak through all the familiar sounds that had always been around

them, and Solvej forced herself to get to her feet and lend a hand. They sat opposite each other at the dining table.

‘Who is this Søren Martinsen actually?’ her mother asked.

‘He’s a kind of odd-job man at Naverslund Hall. He’s the person who arranged everything. He rang me after I put the ad in.’

‘I see.’

There was a brief silence.

‘When are you and Christiane going to see each other again, do you think?’

‘I don’t know,’ Solvej said, and her eyes filled with tears.

It wasn’t true. She would be having Christiane for the first time the following Friday, in five days’ time, for the weekend. But her mother’s gentle voice could evoke a nigh-on unconquerable urge in her to be despondent and vague.

‘That’ll be nice for you. And interesting to meet Morten’s new wife. You said Christiane had taken to her, didn’t you?’

‘How do you think all this will work out?’ Solvej asked.

‘You’ll have to get yourself a washing machine,’ her mother said. ‘I’ll give you one as a moving-in present, if you’ll take it.’

‘I’ll see if I can get a second-hand one,’ Solvej answered.

They talked about the house for a while. Her mother suggested Solvej put up some curtains.

‘You might appreciate being able to draw them,’ she said.

But Solvej said she liked the bare windows, and then her mother didn’t say another word. Behind all the sincere things they said, and behind the quiet rattle of cups on saucers they were having quite a different conversation. Was it the same one? It was impossible to know. But whatever Solvej said her mother listened with infinite patience. Take this off my shoulders, Mother. Of course, Solvej.

As the evening wore on Solvej became more and more nervous and smoked one cigarette after the other. Just before midnight her mother got up.

‘I’ll let in some fresh air,’ she said.

Shortly afterwards she called her from the open patio door.  
‘Come and have a look.’

They walked into the garden. The clouds were gone, and the stars were out. The sky was full of light, and now the spruce trees surrounding the garden were visible. In the distance, sky rocket after sky rocket was launched. They were followed by dull explosions, as though they had been displaced in their passage through the air and rolled in from another world. Solvej went down the steps to the lawn and at once felt the wet seep into her thin shoes. The ground was spongy and soft and saturated. She went down to the edge of the trees, where she could hear a soft trickle of water. It sounded like silver in the darkness. There had to be a stream running through the garden.

‘How far is it to the closest neighbours?’ her mother asked, once they were back inside.

‘That’s Naverslund,’ Solvej answered. ‘A kilometre, I suppose?’

‘But do people live there?’

‘No. It’s offices or something like that.’

‘Well, you’ll find out soon enough,’ her mother said. She must have been getting tired.

Solvej heard her clattering around in the bathroom, and she went upstairs to make the spare bed. The dog followed her and she patted its rough knotted coat as it watched her through half-blind eyes. She spread the duvet over the mattress, and at that moment there was a single loud knock at the door. There was only the one knock. She checked her watch. It was gone half past twelve, and she hadn’t heard a car. She peered out from the first-floor window, looked down into the semicircle of light, down onto all the red beech leaves in the yard and on her car roof. She couldn’t see anything. Even so, she went down and opened the door. As she had presumed, there was no one on the doorstep. There was no one outside. Either it had been an animal brushing against the door or she had been hearing things. But she locked up carefully after her with one

of those old-fashioned numbered keys, rusted, stiff and hard to turn.

Later she lay wide-awake in the downstairs bedroom. It wasn't cold any more, but the bed was damp. She got up, found a blanket and spread it over the mattress. The moonlight caught the mirror at the foot of her bed. The room was full of light and the new sounds that emerged now that it was night. There was some rustling on the patio, from the depths of the garden there came some strange muffled grunting, and inside the sitting room the wood burner softly crackled as the temperature fell. The floorboards creaked, the walls groaned, and there was a noise in the roof gutter outside the window. Above her head, the padding noises persisted. She presumed it was the dog which, like herself, was unable to sleep. She was on the point of dropping off on several occasions, but each time her descent was brought to an abrupt halt by the sound of the small, hard paws. But she was too tired to get up and bring him downstairs.

In the small hours she fell asleep, and when she awoke it was half past eight. She was roused by the door opening. She knelt up in bed and watched the new grey light rise behind the trees. New Year's Day morning.

Exactly one year ago she had been lying in the double bed in Hillerød with a thundering hangover while Christiane crawled all over her and Morten lay next to her, sleeping on his side with his mouth open, hair over his forehead and stark naked beneath the duvet. She only had to stretch out her hand to them and to all that was familiar and secure and she would have it, because at that time it was all hers. But she didn't want to. There was a rhythm inside her, as strong as a river current. Soon, very soon, it would drag her along. That day she got up and set about tidying the house, which stank of cigarettes and half-empty glasses and stale perfume and the leftovers of the roast still on the table. All the excited, happy voices were silent. Little Christiane came to her in the kitchen and took her soured milk from the folding table top, and ate with a bowed head, as



though she sensed her mother was angry. But Solvej saw only what had to be tidied away. Put that away, put everything away, go, go, go, her head pounded. Shortly afterwards Christiane went back to her father's room, and for a while there was calm in the house. All that remained were the faint voices from the bedroom, and the persistent mumbles inside her that she had lived with for all the time she had known her lover. But suddenly the door was torn open, and when she spun round Morten was standing in the doorway, his face contorted and furious and, at last, with an air of justification. There it was. In his hand he was holding one of the letters she had hidden on the slats under the mattress. Without a word he crumpled it in his raised fist and hurled it at her head, and then, all at once, she realised that 'go, go, go' was the parole of the hour; that this was not going to be as easy as she had fondly imagined when 'consequences' and 'change' were still concepts as alien and irrelevant as the words *vindereb* and *øvring* on the spine of the large Danish dictionary in her father's study when she was a child.



They came into view on the lawn. The aged dog sniffed, then raised its stiff right leg while her mother stood with her arms crossed, freezing cold. She kept calling to it in an unbroken stream of encouragement, and her voice was carried on the breeze and rose and fell like a long billowing piece of ribbon. She's still here, Solvej thought with affection. She loved her mother. She longed for the silence that would come following her departure, but also feared its power to close in around her, pulling the cord so tight she could not breathe. She got out of bed and went into the sitting room, where coffee had already been made and the table set. During the night the stove had burned out and the thermometer showed fourteen degrees. She looked at the big logs in the wood basket and opened the stove

doors and regarded the bottom which was covered with cold ash. She had never lit a stove before and had no idea how to do it. Perhaps there was an electric radiator somewhere. One of those might at least postpone the matter for a while, until after her mother left. She searched through all the cupboards, without finding anything, and then her mother came in with the dog and wanted something to eat. She was keen to get going, and had found out there was a morning train. Her suitcase was standing in the hall. ‘Then I can be home with Dad by about half past two,’ she said. ‘That would suit me fine.’

It was six or seven kilometres to the station and they set off in good time, taking the muddy track down through the woods, past the fields and alongside Naverslund Park – a long stretch of grass full of mole hills which lay behind the trees – and turned onto the Hvium road. The countryside was very hilly. They took a detour and followed the fjord, which lay heavy and grey beneath the hills. Large fields gave way to hedges and farms and hamlets with names like Lund, Peterslund. And then, in the far distance, at the foot of a hill, Hvium’s red brick houses came into sight.

They drove down the main street, littered with bottles and rocket sticks and empty mortar casings. In many of the houses the curtains were drawn, it was still early and people were asleep; only in the occasional house did the light from a TV screen flicker behind the curtains. However, at the baker’s a girl in a short-sleeved smock was manoeuvring the sign out onto the pavement with her bare arms, and at the petrol station the blue sign was lit and lights were on in the shop.

The houses seemed low, as if pressed down by the roofs, like much-too-heavy hats, and in several places repairs and building works were underway. It is New Year’s Day, Solvej thought. You can’t complain about the mess. But she didn’t like Hvium.

‘Let’s see now. There are a few shops here,’ Solvej’s mother said optimistically, pointing at the street as they passed. A

supermarket, a butcher's with a gilt bull's head above the door, a bookshop with an orange cellophane blind pulled down and its window with *rov, arse*, scrawled all over it in big white letters, a florist and a petrol station. Solvej forked up towards the station, which turned out to be no more than a halt. She parked in front of a disused glazier's with a tarmac ramp, but they didn't get out of the car. They had arrived in plenty of time. Solvej's mother held her hand and gave it a squeeze.

'Everything'll be fine,' she said, and Solvej didn't answer, for the words frightened her. It wasn't simply a matter of a neutral 'everything' being fine in the course of time, because 'everything' depended on her. If she didn't do the right things 'everything' would not be fine. And what were the right things to do?

'Have I done the right thing?' she blurted.

'What do you mean?'

'By moving here, I mean.'

'I don't think there was any alternative,' her mother said with care. For an instant they were moving towards the edge of a fragility that was on a par with insanity. Christiane, five years old, Solvej's daughter. Was she asleep in bed now, or was she up and about? Solvej couldn't imagine what she was doing. She had no idea what her room, her home in Solsortevej or her new stepmother were like. Instead, she tried to imagine her face, but even Christiane was beginning to slip away and become a stranger. Solvej kneaded her mother's hand and then let go.

Now the signal was flashing by the line and they got out of the car and walked over to the platform.

'Goodbye, dear,' said her mother, kissing her on the forehead. Straight-backed, she grabbed the suitcase with ease and stepped up with the dog in her arms.

'Say hello to Dad,' Solvej remembered to shout. Then the door shut with a jerk, and the train moved off.

Even when it was out of sight Solvej was still standing there. The screeching of the train faded round the bend, long after

the train itself did. From down in the town came a metallic sound, and a magpie chattered on the ridge of a signal box further along the line and was instantly met by more magpie chatter from inside the spruce thicket. Here Hvium ended in the grassy terrain of Danish Railways. A chill ran through her. She shivered and went down to the car.

On the way home she stopped at the baker's and bought bread, butter and a newspaper. She ought to have gone back to the house and unpacked and scoured the job adverts, but she knew deep down this was not how it was going to be. She had begun to burn inside, and after paying for the goods, she asked: 'By the way – how do I get to Solsortevej?' and the girl explained it wasn't so hard to find. She had to go straight on past the petrol station and Brugsen supermarket, and then bear right. That was the birdie quarter, the girl said, where all the streets were named after birds.

She turned off at Fuglebakken and entered a housing estate. She drove past Toplærkevej and slowed down before the next turning: Solsortevej. Now her heart was pounding so hard that sweat broke out on her neck and face. There was no other traffic, and she inched forward while keeping an eye open for the house numbers. Number 8, number 15. After the hedge it was number 17. Her eyes devoured everything she saw. The house was a yellow-brick bungalow from the seventies. There was a little garden at the front, and a gate leading to the rear garden. A dark thuja by one end of the house. In the carport there was a vehicle she hadn't seen before. She caught a glimpse of a new lamp in the kitchen window and three new bikes by the gate – two for adults and one for a child – and a concrete birdbath, shaped like a dock leaf. Was this really Christiane's home?

Nothing reminded her of the life they'd had in Hillerød.

This was the signature of the new woman. Or was it Hvium's?

When she returned home the temperature in the sitting room had sunk to twelve degrees. She started tidying away her clothes. There were no hangers, so she decided to put her dresses in the set of drawers. The flowery paper that lined them looked as if it had been there for decades, so she tore it off and removed the drawing pins with a table knife. When she wiped down the drawers they gave off a smell that was redolent of a very old man. She also cleaned the shelves in the cupboard, and as her cloth ran over the top one, it met an envelope addressed to Mira Baldermand, Skovhuset, Hvium, and a bottle of white nail varnish. She disposed of both. Afterwards she took the empty suitcases to the outbuildings. There were several rooms and a woodshed with a chopping block. From behind a closed door she could hear alternate sucking-in and breathing-out noises. She opened the door and in the darkness was met by one red and one green glowing electric eye – she didn't know what it was.

For some hours she continued her unpacking. She dusted down the empty bookcases and arranged her books on them. She tried to get the radio to work and clambered around with the aerial, on top of chairs and in various directions, and was rewarded for her efforts with the shipping forecasts from Kalundborg on long and medium wave. The words came to her from a long, long distance away, a faint hiss, like when you put your ear to the inside of a pipe and hear the rushing of your own blood. It was now bitingly cold in the house, and she was frozen, despite being on the move all the time. She would have to light the fire.

Back across the yard. The trees were dripping. Again there was low-lying grey mist between the trunks. When she examined the trees closely she had the impression they were swaying. But the day was drawing to a close, and the colours and her eyesight were fading. In the shed she found an axe and chopped a log into thin sticks. Her handiwork looked good; she could do this, she thought. But when she had placed the

kindling on the newspaper and lit a match, smoke seeped out through the closed doors, and she only made matters worse when she began to waft a folded newspaper. This put her in a terrible mood.

‘I can’t stand this,’ she mumbled and went out, put on an overcoat and left the house. She got in the car and drove to Hvium, to the housing estate, and this time she parked directly outside Solsortevej 17.

The door of the yellow house opened with a bang and Morten came onto the steps in shirt sleeves, his blond hair closely cropped, clean-shaven. There he was. It was two months since she had last seen him, since he and Christiane had moved to Hvium, when everything was so terrible. But the sight of him obliterated all that. For there he was, Morten, and the familiarity and intimacy streamed through her like her own blood. She was as optimistic and happy now as she had been depressed a mere quarter of an hour ago. We'll soon sort this out, she thought. We don't wish each other ill after all. Now Christiane will be fine. We will all be fine. A series of fleeting images of a summer party in her new garden flashed through her head, with her, Christiane, Morten and Morten's new girlfriend sitting at the table beneath one of the tall trees, a lamp hanging between the leaves as darkness fell. She locked the car and began to walk up the garden path, and in so doing realised something was not right. He hadn't moved, and he was standing there with his arms crossed. He wasn't smiling, and her happiness froze.

She became nervous. She glanced at him and looked down. His face was impassive. He had changed in the course of the last few months. His weight had been transplanted to other areas, his body had gone downhill. Once he had been a shining light. Now he did not look a happy man. But she imagined he had assumed this expression for her, and that he used his real face in other contexts.

'Hi,' she said warily, realising as she did so that she didn't know what she wanted.

He did though.

'I was afraid you might make an appearance,' he said. It sounded so formal, as though it was a sentence he had rehearsed, and she almost laughed. But she didn't. And when he said nothing either, once again it struck her that this was serious.

'Didn't you believe I meant it?' she asked.

He didn't answer.

He towered above her. She wished he would come down the steps towards her, but he didn't, so she stepped up.

'Quite frankly, Solvej, don't you think this is a bit crazy?'

'What do you mean?'

'What are you going to do here?'

'I've found somewhere to live.'

He grimaced. He didn't take his eyes off her for a second, and she was frightened, for there was nothing of their old, mutual language left. There was only contempt.

'I'll find a job,' she persisted.

'That won't be so easy.'

'I'll find one,' she repeated.

'Where?' he asked.

'I'm not fussy. I can take something at an old people's home if I have to. And I'm not afraid of driving long distances, either. I've got a car.'

'Yes, but what do you want here?'

'Don't you know?'

Whereupon he glanced to the side for the first time. A glazed blue pot on the edge of the step, that was what he was



looking at, and for a brief moment Solvej allowed herself to be distracted. It was very ugly. Imagine him even considering such a dreadful pot there, she thought, and everything slotted into place for her, and once again she realised she was standing face-to-face with a man she no longer knew.

‘You appear out of nowhere,’ he went on. ‘Can’t you get it into your head that this is something I have feared? You don’t seem very well, Solvej.’

‘Don’t I seem well?’ She gasped for breath and forgot all about the pot. ‘Christiane is here. She’s my child. I’m her mother. We need each other.’

‘You’ve heard someone say that. You don’t give a damn, Solvej.’

‘Don’t give a damn? How can you say that?’

‘You were bored on Zealand, and so you got this idea in your head. Can’t you just leave us in peace? Christiane doesn’t need any more drama. She needs peace.’

‘She needs her mother.’

‘Do you really believe that?’

She wasn’t coping well. Her head was in turmoil. Why did she respond to his insults as if she believed them? She straightened her back.

When he had come out he had left the door ajar. Now he did something strange. He opened it wider and glanced behind him. She caught a glimpse of the porch and the back of Morten’s head in a mirror. His hair was flat against the back of his head as though he had been recumbent when she arrived. Behind the kitchen window a figure glided past.

‘I can’t stand here on the step squabbling with you,’ he blurted in a sudden resigned tone, which she recognised from the time they lived together, when after an exhausting row he was sick and tired of her, and this gave her new hope.

‘Come down the road with me then. Let’s go for a walk, so we can put this argument behind us,’ she suggested.

‘Not a chance,’ he said, sounding alien again. At that moment she caught a glimpse of the new girlfriend walking

past in the hall. A tall, dark-haired woman, probably the same age, looking straight ahead as she passed, apparently unaware of the open door. But the erect back showed that she knew what was going on. Of course they would have spoken about her before. They would have spoken about how she might turn up, and they would have discussed how to deal with this. Now she was walking around in there, showing that they were two against one, as indeed they were. Solvej was alone. Despondency washed through her again.

There was a short silence. They were both waiting.

‘Quite frankly, I think you should go home, Solvej.’

‘Home where?’

‘Oh, give it a rest,’ he said. ‘Forget this crazy idea. Nothing good will come of this. Hvium is not the sort of place for you.’

‘I don’t care,’ she replied. ‘I haven’t come here to see Hvium.’

‘I don’t think you’ll be staying long,’ he said.

‘You’ll see.’

Then there was a slight movement and a stifled sound in the hall. As Solvej craned her neck she caught a glimpse of Christiane in the corner. She was wearing a pair of striped tights and a small denim skirt, and her legs were tucked up underneath her.

‘Ohh,’ Solvej said.

‘Hang on a moment.’ Morten went inside, but didn’t close the door completely and Solvej stood burning with emotion, because Christiane was inside and for reasons she could not grasp, Solvej was not allowed to go in and pick her up.

‘Let me see her,’ she begged when he reappeared.

‘This is what you wanted, Solvej.’

‘I never wanted this.’

‘You’re the one who left. Now you’ll have to take what you get.’

‘So because you leave that means you ...?’ She could not find the words, she stammered with fury and frustration, but he couldn’t even be bothered to answer.

‘We’re done with all that. It’s black and white, Solvej. You’ve let go, once and for all. And just because you get some notion in your head that you want to play mummy, don’t think the whole world can be turned upside down for you.’

‘That’s not true,’ she sobbed. ‘You’ve got it all wrong.’

‘No, I haven’t. What I’ve said is true.’

‘I just want to see her. It’s been months. And she knows I’m here.’

‘But she isn’t pleased that you’ve come, Solvej.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘She’s crying.’

‘But that’s because the whole situation is so strained. If we could just talk nicely to each other, if you would just let me see her ...’

‘No, you’re wrong, the same way you’re always wrong. It’s because she needs peace, Solvej. You make her nervous ...’

Now he had adopted a lecturing tone. She knew that one too, even though it was of recent vintage, from the session with the solicitor and at the regional family affairs office, where there was a long scratch across the yellow table and the place stank of detergent. At the time she’d had to concentrate hard just to follow the thread and afterwards she remembered nothing of what had been said, only the tone and the consequences, alternating with intimidating bursts of anger.

‘You can have her next weekend,’ Morten said, ‘even though you don’t deserve it. That’s what we agreed originally.’ And with that he took a step back into the hall, and firmly closed the door.

She knocked, and the door was torn open.

‘What is it now?’

‘Smoke comes out when I light the stove. What shall I do?’

‘Have you opened the vent?’

‘Vent?’

‘You have to turn the knob on the vent, so the flames can get air.’

The whole way back past Naverslund and down the mud track she kept banging her fist on the steering wheel and shouting and complaining and crying, but as she turned into the drive she suddenly stopped. Two grey crows took off from a tree and flew over the rooftops, and then there was an immense silence. The quietness was in the trees, in the air, in the little house before her. She shivered and found the key in her bag and unlocked the door. A raw chill emanated from the bricks in the hall, and the sitting room was not a lot better. The vent was closed. She opened it. She crumpled up some paper, placed the kindling on top and lit a match and the moment she closed the doors the thin, grey smoke seeped out through the cracks, more and more, until it was pouring into the sitting room. Her eyes were watering and she pushed open the windows and doors, and scraped the smouldering remains of wood into a pan and carried them out into the yard. It was as if there was no strength left in her, as though everything had quietly trickled out of her over the last year, and it was only now that she had reached rock bottom.

She went to run the bath. Brown water gushed out when she opened the tap, and she let it run for a couple of minutes until it became lighter in colour and then put the plug in and poured in the bath foam to hide the dirt. She made a cup of tea and found a blanket and wrapped herself in it with one hand while holding the mug with the other. Afterwards she went into the bathroom and turned off the water, which was running out now in a very thin stream. Despite the bath foam, it didn't look inviting, but she undressed at speed and then stepped into the tub, and again it happened, something she had experienced so many times before: as soon as she herself fell quiet, everything went quiet. There were no cars, no rushing noises, no sounds of life. She splashed the water about with her hand, then stopped. Despair cascaded over her. She couldn't even howl any more.

And it was then that she thought again of Tobias and the two fingers he had placed against her cheek. If that had never happened? What then?

Oh, this was all too abstract. She was here. It had happened. She had been given the chance to feel.