

Tiller The Slope

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Dad overturned his coffee cup, so everything ran down the centre pages of the newspaper. Dad wasn't at all angry today, for all he said was 'huh' when he spilt the coffee. He got up from the kitchen chair went over to the draining board to fetch a dish cloth. A dark stain had spread out on the pages of the newspaper. The centre pages were like legs held apart, and the dark stain reminded me of a piss-soaked crotch. I hadn't wet myself for several nights now. Dad dried up the coffee he had spilt. 'You must try and have a pee before we leave,' dad said. 'It's quite a long drive,' he said. When I came out of the loo, dad had put on his blue ski suit. 'Put your ski boots on and be a bit sharpish,' dad said. I put on my ski boots and then went out into the yard. Dad had taken the skis out of the shed when I came out. He had leant the skis up against the garage wall, and was now standing with a small spray can in his hand. He pointed the spray can at the underside of one of the skis. A blue flame started to lick the sole of the ski. One of our neighbours had a chow-chow, and the flame was like its blue tongue. The wax slowly ran down the black sole of the ski. The wax reminded me of resin slowly sliding down a tree-trunk. I just stood there looking at the thick-flowing resin. Dad waved and said 'hello' to me. 'Anyone at home in that head of yours?' he said. He was in quite a good mood today, and now he suddenly started to smile at me. I smiled back at dad. Dad asked me what I was standing there philosophising about. I asked if it was true that he used resin as chewing gum when he was small. Dad looked down at me and asked me why on earth I asked him that. I shrugged my shoulders and said I was just asking. Dad looked at me for a couple of seconds. 'Put the soft wax on now,' dad said. He handed me a red tube with white squeeze marks at the bottom. The sticky tube of soft wax stuck to my palm, and finally I had to wrench it free. The strands reminded me of cheese stretched out between two slices of pizza, and I wrinkled my nose and said 'ugh'. Dad really smiled when I said 'ugh'. Dad said you had to put up with things like that when you were off on a trip. Dad went over to the car and lay the skis on the roof. Then he took a black rubber strap from his pocket. He fixed one end of the strap to the roof rack and threw the other end over the car roof. He went quickly round the small Beetle. He took hold of the other end and tightened the strap with a tug. Thin wrinkles and lines appeared at the end of the strap, and I stood there staring in fright at dad. I was afraid the rubber strap would snap with a crack. Dad could get furious if a rubber strap broke like that. Dad looked at me and smiled. 'What are you standing gawping at again?' he asked. He shook his head again in despair. 'Come on, then,' he said. 'Now we're off.' I was thinking it was a good thing the rubber strap hadn't snapped.

The parking space at the bottom of Klatrebakken was full, so we had to follow the forest road right up to where the flood-lit track started. Dad took the skis down from the roof. He dragged them down in front of me and said 'Right you are, then.' I stuck the tip of my ski-boots into the binding. I thought it was great to see how well the tip of the boot fitted the rat-trap binding. We started up the slope of Klatrebakken. Dad went at a fast pace, and I had to

work hard to keep up with him. The back of my neck and my fingers felt so clammy. The back of my neck itched so terribly under the cap. I took off my cap and windproof mittens and asked dad if he could put them in his rucksack. Dad nodded and placed the cap and the mittens in his rucksack. Then we went on up again. We set off down a steep slope where there were no tracks. It went terribly fast downhill, and my fibula cracked like a dry branch when I fell. I lay there screaming in the snow. I twisted and turned, and it was almost as if I was 'making angels', spread-eagling in the snow. Dad took off my boot, pulled down the ski sock and pulled my long underpants up my lower leg. He felt my leg with his tobacco-stained fingers. I screamed at once. Dad stretched out my red ski sock and filled it with snow. Then he pulled the sock back up my leg again. He took out a ski strap which he fastened just below my knee. 'Is that too tight?' dad asked me. I shook my head. 'It's so the sock won't slip down,' dad said. The snow was cold between my leg and the ski sock. Dad removed my other ski. Dad lifted me up in his strong arms and said that everything would be alright. Dad kissed me on the cheek. Dad had never kissed me on the cheek before. He gave me a smile as he started to climb up the hill. His strides were so measured and firm. 'Try and lie still now,' dad said. 'Everything's fine,' dad said. I couldn't manage to lie completely still. Stabs of pain shot up my leg, and soon my foot started to go up and down of its own accord. Dad roared 'ow!' when I kicked him on the cheek. 'I told you to bloody well keep still,' dad shouted. Squirrel's teeth suddenly began to snap at my intestines. I felt so terribly scared, and the tears just coursed down my cheeks. Dad muttered that it would all be alright. Dad sweated up to the top of the hill and snow-ploughed down Klatrebakken. At last I caught sight of our car. Dad swung a snow screen that smacked heavily and soggly against the body of the car. The snow slid slowly down it and dripped in lumps into the greyish slush. Dad opened the back door and lay me on the back seat. Dad started the Beetle with a roar. Dad turned on the emergency blinkers and trod on the accelerator. The back wheels spun through the snow down to the gravel. Dad changed gear and trod harder on the accelerator. I had never seen dad drive as fast before. He never normally overtook other cars, but on his way to the hospital he overtook both an Audi and a Volvo estate car. I felt the warmth spread through me when he overtook the cars. Now the neighbours should have seen us, I thought. Now the neighbours should have seen how anxious dad was for me, I thought. Parents in the neighbourhood were going to have a volunteer day down at the playground today, but dad said he wasn't going to take part in any volunteer day. 'I'm not bloody well going to be a slave labourer for those on the committee in the residents association,' dad said. 'They just want to have someone to do all the dirty work for them,' he said. 'They don't want to dirty their hands themselves,' he said. Mum gave a smirk and shook her head. She asked if that was why he didn't want to take part in the volunteer day. She didn't even look up from her weekly magazine. Dad asked her what she was smirking at. Mum asked if the committee members weren't going to turn up as well for the volunteer day. She still didn't look up from her weekly magazine. Dad gave a snort through his nose. 'Hah!' he said. He said that that would be a sight to see. He said they probably didn't even know what was up and down on a saw. Mum turned the page in her magazine. Mum looked up as she turned the page. She gave dad a grim smile. 'In that case, you ought to be there as well at any rate,' she said. 'It sounds as if they really are in need of a real man,' she said. Dad stared at mum. Dad asked if she

was taking the Mickey. Mum laid aside her magazine. 'Well, honestly,' mum said. Mum said that we were just as responsible as the other neighbours for the playground. 'Is that so?' dad said. Dad nodded in my direction. Dad asked if she had ever seen me down at the playground. Mum said that things could soon change. Dad grinned and said he'd believe that when he saw it. Mum picked up the magazine again. She didn't say anything more for a while. Dad must have felt he had got the upper hand, for now he started to talk about the committee of the residents association again. He said he would have liked to look at the hands of those on the committee. He said he would have liked to count the number of forced labourers they had working for them. He went on and on about the committee of the residents association, shaking his head from time to time and smiling. Occasionally mum raised her eyebrows during all of this. 'Pen-pushers,' dad sneered. 'Never done an honest day's work in their lives.' Mum suddenly looked up at him sourly. 'Huh!' she said with a wry smile. 'Why can't you just let up for once,' she said. Dad looked across at mum. Mum asked if he couldn't spare her all the excuses. Mum asked if he couldn't just take the bottle out of the cupboard right away instead. 'Do you think I'm stupid?' mum asked. 'Dad asked what the hell she was talking about. Dad asked if she was making a fool of him in front of the boy. Mum snorted and said that he managed that bloody well himself. She asked if dad could actually remember anything of yesterday evening. She asked if dad could remember what he'd done. Dad stared at mum, fuming. Dad didn't like to be reminded of what he had done when he was drunk. Dad had hit mum in the face yesterday evening. Dad didn't want to hear anything about that today. Dad told mum she ought to keep her trap shut. I didn't want to be in the living room any longer. I ran off to my room and sat down. Mum and dad stood bellowing at each other for a while, and then I heard dad slam the living room door. I sat completely still and just listened. I could only just make out mum was sobbing.

A little while later, the chairman of the residents association rang the doorbell. He asked if dad was at home. I said dad was taking an afternoon nap right now. 'Who is it?' mum called out from the kitchen. Mum came out into the front hall before I had time to answer. Mum smiled at the chairman of the residents association. The chairman said he just wondered if dad had thought about taking part in the volunteer day. Mum thought for a second before replying. Mum said that she honestly didn't know. 'You really ought to ask him yourself,' she said. 'Wait a moment, I'll fetch him,' she said and went and stood outside the bedroom. 'You must come out now,' she shouted to dad. 'There's someone here wants to speak to you,' she shouted. I heard dad ask who it was, but mum didn't answer his question. I heard dad ask again, but mum still didn't reply. Mum came out to us again with her rolling gait. Mum started to talk to the chairman about the volunteer day. Mum had such an extremely gentle manner with the chairman. Soon afterwards dad came out of the bedroom. Mum raised her voice a bit when dad came out. 'We'll just have to hope that the neighbours all do their bit now,' mum said. The chairman said that until now people had certainly been positive. Mum said that was the least you could expect. Mum said that it was in people's own interest. She turned round towards my father. 'Don't you think?' she said. Dad looked daggers at mum. Dad didn't answer her question. Dad looked at the chairman of the residents association and gave a brief nod. The chairman gracefully returned his greeting. The chairman asked if dad had time to take part in volunteer day.

Dad didn't answer the question at once. He went out into the front hall and joined the chairman. He closed the hall door, so that mum and me were left standing in the hall. My mother smiled wryly and shook her head. 'Bloody hell,' mum said, and then went into the living room and sat down.

A while later dad came into the living room to us. His workclothes were hanging over the wicker chair in the corner. Dad went over to it and started to put on his boilersuit. Mum looked at dad. My mother started to smile broadly. Dad asked her what she was smiling at. Mum asked if dad was going to take part in the volunteer day after all now. Dad didn't answer at once. Dad looked down at the zip in the boilersuit. Dad started to fiddle with the zip on the boilersuit. My mother smiled broadly and shook her head again. Dad tugged at the zip. Mum asked the same question again. Dad looked sharply up at mum. Dad let out a rough 'heh'. Mum didn't let up. She looked brazenly at Dad and asked the same question yet again. Dad answered before she had finished the sentence. Dad was angry and his voice was rough. Dad said there was no way of getting out of it. 'Oh, you don't say,' mum said. Mum had a smirk on her face. 'So it's suddenly alright to be a slave labourer, is it?' she said. Dad told her to shut up. Dad said he hadn't meant it all that literally. Mum still had a smirk on her face. Mum lifted her eyebrows and said 'Oh, really?' mum said she had got that impression. Dad was still fiddling a bit with the zip. His jaws were working. Dad suddenly looked up at my mum again. 'There aren't enough bloody people down there,' he said. Dad's voice sounded overwrought. 'And they haven't got any implements for the job,' he said. Dad tugged and tugged at the zip. He started to talk about what sort of implements he'd have to take down there with him. He got more and more worked up, and mum sat in the armchair, smiling to herself. She looked down at her magazine while dad ranted away. Dad started ranting away about the committee of the residents association again. Dad said it was a proper shower to have to try and organise. 'They haven't even got hold of a sledgehammer,' he said. Dad smiled to himself. He wondered how they had thought about driving down fence posts without a sledgehammer. He smiled sarcastically and shook his head. 'God almighty, what a shower,' he said. Mum looked up at dad once more. Mum still had that irritating smirk there under her nose. 'And that's what you said to the chairman of the residents association too, is it?' mum asked. Dad looked daggers at mum. Dad asked her what the hell was the matter with her. Mum said there was nothing the matter with her. Mum said she just wondered. Mum said it wasn't worth complaining to her. 'I think it might be more effective to talk to those on the committee,' mum said. 'Since you're so forthright when it comes to speaking,' she said, and gave a short laugh. Dad was white-hot with rage. He ripped up the zip and went off down to the playground.

I went down to the playground an hour later. Dad was the only one in a boilersuit, and he was working a lot faster than all the others down there. Dad was digging holes for the posts for the see-saw. I got butterflies in my stomach when I saw how fast dad was working. The others kept on taking breaks, but dad didn't take a break until he had been at it for a couple of hours. My father sat down on a pile of fence posts. The others sat down on the rails of a new sandpit, so dad was sitting a bit away from the others. The others sat there talking about the speed limits in the neighbourhood. The speed limits in the neighbourhood were far too high, in their opinion. Dad didn't say anything about the speed limits. Dad sat smoking up on the pile of fence posts. He

rested his elbows on his knees and looked down into the gravel. From time to time he spit out small flakes of tobacco and coughed. The chairman of the residents association went over to dad. The chairman of the residents association gave dad a pleasant smile. 'Good of you to come along and help,' he said. The others stopped talking when they realised the chairman was chatting to dad. The others turned and looked at dad. The others sat there waiting for him to say something. Dad saw that the others were sitting there looking at him. He didn't manage to say a word at first. The others were waiting and waiting for him to say something. Suddenly, dad's face turned crimson. Dad wanted to say something at once, but when he opened his mouth all he could do was stutter. The stuttering made dad grow even redder in the face. The others turned away when dad started to stutter. The others started to talk with each other about the weather. They were talking a lot quieter than they had been doing a bit earlier. Dad let his stuttering end up as a dry cough. Dad muttered that his throat was a bit tickly. 'It's the time of year for that,' the chairman said. Dad nodded and went on coughing. Dad didn't get to say anything else. For a brief instant I saw dad glimpsed me. He looked away immediately and started to cough again. The chairman of the residents association smacked the palms of his hands against his knees and said 'Right, now.' The chairman said that this wouldn't do. 'We've got to get back to work,' he said.

They got up and started working again. Dad began to dig holes for the fence posts. I sat on a cement pipe and looked at dad. Dad was so good at working. He worked a lot faster than the others, and everything he did went so smoothly. Suddenly he turned round and snarled in a low voice at me. 'What is it you're sitting there staring at?' he snarled. 'You've been bloody well sitting there gawping for over two hours now,' he snarled. My mouth opened slowly. All that came out of my mouth was a little 'eh'. Dad took a quick look round. Dad looked both ways. None of the others were looking at us, and dad turned round to face me again. He went on snarling in a low voice at me. He asked me why I couldn't be together with the other boys instead. Not a word escaped my mouth. I sat there staring at some small stones I had in one of my hands. Dad snorted and said 'Good grief'. Dad said I was to clear out at any rate. He said he couldn't work properly with me staring at him all the time. I didn't say anything, but I did as he said. I got up from the cement pipe and started to leave. Two of the other parents stood looking at us. They turned away when I looked at them. They looked seriously at each other before starting to work again. I didn't say goodbye to dad. I went over the playground towards the unsurfaced road. At the exit the chairman of the residents association was busy lifting down a sack of cement from a trailer. The chairman of the residents association smiled at me as he took hold of the sack with his arms. Dad smiled really warmly at me, and then he lifted me off the backseat of the car and carried me into reception. The parents of the kids in the neighbourhood should have seen me and dad right now. There were loads of people at reception, and all of them looked at me and dad as we came in. I liked them looking at me and dad now. Dad said he thought I'd broken my foot. The woman at reception nodded and pointed to the lift door. They said we had to take the lift up to the fourth floor. 'We'll phone and tell them you're coming,' they said.

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The singing of birds trickled through the quivering green of the birch wood. Yellow shafts of sunlight made diagonal slits in the foliage, down to the woodland floor. I was lying up on a ledge of rock padded with moss. I placed a large wild strawberry on my tongue, curled it backwards into my mouth and squashed it between tongue and palate. Its sweet taste flooded the cavity of my mouth. I stretched out my hand and picked another strawberry. I held the granulated red globe of fruit between my forefinger and my thumb. Suddenly I heard a light rustling in the bushes behind me. I jerked up into a sitting position. I stared into the dense underwood. There I heard the swishing noise of a released branch. I sat motionless, staring straight at the underwood. I sat with stiff eyes and outstretched neck, but I couldn't see anyone in there. I was beginning to feel really nervous. Insect legs started to scratch away inside me, and I was breathing a lot faster than usual. 'Is there anyone over there?' I asked. I didn't get any reply when I asked. 'Is there anyone there?' I asked again. No one answered this time, either. All that can be heard is the singing of small birds. I have had many nightmares about the singing of small birds since. When I lived in the flat, I wrote poems and short stories about those nightmares. I wrote a lot of poems and short stories that had to do with nightmares. Those who survived the Titanic had nightmare after nightmare about dark, still nights. They lay in wide beds tossing and turning, leaving dark sweat-stains on the sheets. They groaned heavily while throwing their head from side to side. Their heads reminded you of round buoys when the storm lashes the small-boat harbour. Their mad faces were like wrung floor-cloths. Behind their faces it was completely still. The Titanic had just been swallowed by the ocean, and the survivors were sitting in the lifeboats staring ahead of them. Only a short while ago, the ship had been a dying elephant in front of their eyes. An elephant know when it is about to die. An elephant goes quietly off to the elephant graveyard and lies down. The wait is long and painful, and the elephant peers out time after time with its listless eyes. From time to time, he flings out his trunk in a final convulsion. The elephant's trunk is a distress signal rocket that no one notices. No one noticed the distress rocket fired from the Titanic. The last rocket made a yellow streak across the black canvas. Each of us had painted our own picture for the breaking-up party that evening. All we needed was balloons up on the ceiling and we were finished. The teacher said there wasn't enough time to hang up the balloons now. He said we could hang up the balloons after the parents' meeting instead. There was to be a parents' meeting before the breaking-up party that evening. Mum didn't say anything during the parents' meeting. Some of the parents asked questions all the time, but mum sat right at the back without saying anything. The parents of the popular boys asked question after question. The parents of the popular boys just kept on asking questions, and mum was dying for a fag. She had taken up her tobacco pouch from her handbag, and now she started to roll herself a cigarette. The parents of the popular boys went on asking questions. Mum put the tobacco pouch back into her handbag. Mum sat there with the rolled cigarette in her hand. Two of the other parents caught sight of mum's fag. They sat there glancing at her cigarette, then looked at each other and chuckled. Mum was really dying for a fag now. The parents of the popular boys never came to an end of their questions, and mum was getting more and more restless in her chair. Mum

crossed her right leg over her left. After a while, mum took down her right leg. Mum crossed her left leg over her right. Mum pulled up her sleeve to see what the time was. After quite a while, the parents of the popular boys had finished asking about everything they were wondering about. Mum got up quickly from her chair. Mum waddled over to the exit. Mum turned round towards me. She said she was just going to have a puff.

I went into the classroom to help with the decorations. I blew up balloon after balloon. I rubbed the balloons against my hair and then gave them to the teacher. The teacher stood up on a chair and hung the balloons on the ceiling. After a while the parents came into the classroom. Mum came almost last into the classroom. Mum smelled of stale smoke. Mum was breathing heavily, and her face was red and shiny. Mum got out of breath just by going up some steep stairs. Mum stood there, looking round. She was breathing really heavily as she looked round for an empty seat. The parents of the popular boys had an empty place at the table, and mum asked if she could sit there. The woman in the hat nodded and told her to help herself. The name of the woman in the hat was Andrea Ovesen. Mum sat down next to Andrea Ovesen and her husband. I had now finished blowing up balloons. I went and sat down next to mum. Mum smiled and looked at me. Mum didn't say a single word. The other parents talked about where they were going for their holidays. The parents of some of the popular boys talked about travelling to southern Europe, and Andrea Ovesen said it would be nice to go to somewhere warmer. The others agreed with her. They said they were so fed up with snow and winter they were quite sick of it. Mum didn't say anything to the other parents. Mum just sat there in her chair. The other parents talked and laughed with each other. Mum sat silent and smiling, but under the table she was drumming her thigh restlessly with a forefinger. Suddenly mum turned towards me. Mum asked me what did I think I looked like. Mum spoke very loudly, and then she burst out laughing and shook her head in resignation. Mum leaned over towards me. Mum pointed down at my sweater. I looked down, but I couldn't see anything special about my sweater. I asked her what it was. Mum said just wait a moment. Mum took a handkerchief up out of her handbag, and started to wipe my sweater clean. I asked her what she was doing. One of the popular boys was sitting on the other side of the table. The popular boy looked at me and mum. My head was boiling. I didn't like mum talking so much louder than the other parents. I asked mum what on earth she thought she was doing. I spoke even louder than mum. I almost shouted at mum. Mum got tense when I shouted, and a flush of red came over her face like a roller blind being let down. Mum did her best to laugh it off. 'You've got a spot on your sweater,' she said as she stopped wiping. Mum straightened up and said that. Mum said that now the spot was gone. Mum smiled uncertainly at me. The other parents looked at me and mum. Mum turned towards the other parents. She smiled and said it made no difference how often she washed things. 'He's just as dirty again after five minutes,' she said. Mum laughed out loud, and the other parents smiled back at her. Silence fell for a few seconds. Andrea Ovesen turned and looked at mum. Andrea Ovesen said that was how things should be at that age. Mum was pleased that Andrea Ovesen spoke to her. Mum began to talk to Andrea Ovesen. Mum said that she very much agreed with what Andrea Ovesen had said at the parents' meeting. Mum repeated much of what Andrea Ovesen had said at the parents' meeting, and then added that that was her opinion, at any rate. Andrea

Ovesen nodded and smiled at mum. She didn't say all that much while mum was talking. Suddenly mum began talking about me and Andrea Ovesen's son. Mum said I had said a lot of nice things about her son. I really liked her son, mum told her. Andrea Ovesen smiled and said 'Oh, really?'. 'That was nice to hear,' Andrea Ovesen said. I looked away without saying anything. I didn't like her son at all, but I had mentioned him once when mum asked me who I was often with at school. I had said that I didn't stick around with anyone in particular. I said I stuck around with lots of different people. Mum hadn't stopped pestering me, and finally I'd said that Kent Ovesen was my best buddy. Kent Ovesen was sitting on the far side of the table right now. Kent Ovesen heard what mum said, and my head felt hotter and hotter. I stared down at the tips of my shoes. Kent Ovesen didn't say anything either. Mum looked across at Kent Ovesen. Mum said he could just come home with me some time. Mum nodded and smiled at Kent Ovesen. Andrea Ovesen looked hard at her son while she smiled and nodded cautiously. Kent Ovesen looked at mum and nodded. Mum started to tell him about all the things we could do. Mum said that we could play with my soldiers, for example. Kent Ovesen nodded at mum again. Mum turned round to Andrea Ovesen again. Mum talked away, and Andrea Ovesen nodded and said 'Yes' from time to time. Andrea Ovesen smiled and said 'Mm' once in a while. Suddenly mum had such a lot to talk about. Mum laughed out loud at what she was saying, and Andrea Ovesen smiled wanly when mum laughed. After a while, Andrea Ovesen said that mum must excuse her for a moment. She had to pop off to the toilet, she said. 'Of course,' mum said.

A few minutes later Andrea Ovesen came back again. She smiled at mum, but didn't sit down in the same place again. She sat further down the same table instead. She started to speak to the father of one of the cute girls. 'I really must have a word with you, Fredrik,' she said. Peals of laughter accompanied her words with the father of the cute girl. After a little while mum began to ask me about things she already knew the answer to. 'Why are you asking me that?' I said. 'You know all about that,' I said. My mother gave me a wan smile. Mum said that she didn't. I said that oh yes she did. Mum shook her head and forced herself to laugh. 'Yes, well, enough of that,' mum said. Mum didn't say anything more for a long time. The chair next to mum's was empty the rest of the evening. The desk of the girl from next door had been empty for many days now. The girl from next door was sitting between two of the popular boys now. The popular boys were playing guitar and singing in faultless English. I did my best to sing along with the popular boys. I was best in the whole class at singing, but I wasn't as good as the others at English. One of the popular boys said I was singing wrong all the time. 'Learn the lyrics if you want to sing,' he said. I didn't feel like singing any more. I picked up a Rubrik's Cube and started to twist it instead. One of the cute girls told me to put down her cube. I told her to wait a bit. She told me again to put down the cube. I didn't put down her cube. She came over and grabbed the cube from my hands. I gave her the finger, and said she was a stupid cunt. The other girls were angry with me. 'Do you really dare look yourself in the mirror with that underhung jaw of yours?' the girl from next door said. The girl from next door said I bloody well looked like her goldfish. The others in the class exploded with laughter. Their laughter blasted a hole in through my ears and stayed echoing at fever pitch inside my head. I stared fuming at the bloody girl from next door. I tried to find something hurtful to say and finally a called her

a bloody nigger. The others shouted 'You bastard' at me. The others shouted 'Bloody racist' at me. I left the corridor and went into the classroom. The teacher usually sat in the teachers' room during the long break, so the classroom was empty right now. I went over to one of the tall windows. I leant against the stove that was mounted on the wall. Suddenly, someone had pinned my arms. I felt a sticky hand rub against my face. I shook my head violently, but the sticky hand went on rubbing and rubbing against my face. I shouted to them to bloody well let go. After a while they let go. It was one of the popular boys who had pinned my arms, and it was the girl from next door who had rubbed something sticky in my face. The face of the girl from next door was hard and angry. The girl from next door was the cutest in the whole class. Her brown eyes made me think of hazelnuts, and her hair flowed like a black stream down over her shoulders. The woman turned the soft drink bottle upside-down and the cola ran out and hit the pavement with a small splash. She was wearing leopard-pattern trousers and a cone-shaped paper hat on her head. A large-limbed man with red pig's eyes was sitting next to her. He was resting his hands on his knees, and I noticed that the hairy backs of his hands were as broad as bricks. He looked tired, and a sad cigarette drooped from his mouth. The woman and the large-limbed man suddenly caught sight of me. The large-limbed man peered at me with listless eyes. He reminded me of a cow in the hot sun when he peered like that. The woman put the empty cola bottle down on the edge of the pavement. She asked me if I was training doing the 100 metres in the middle of the night. She gave a hoarse, worn laugh. Her laughter ground its way up through her throat, ending in a rasping smoker's cough. I couldn't think of anything to say right then. I had to make absolutely sure at any rate not to say that the police were after me. The woman and the man looked quizzically at me. They sat there like that for a few seconds, staring at me. They were probably expecting me to say something. I searched for a good excuse, and suddenly remembered I had been chased by a rottweiler. I quickly pointed to a nearby house. I pointed into thin air with my forefinger and said 'There'. 'There, there, there,' I said. The large-limbed man turned slowly to the woman. He lifted one of his eyebrows and grinned. The woman looked at him and grinned back, and then they turned back towards me again. I quickly said that I had taken a short cut through the neighbour's garden. The neighbour's rottweiler had frightened the life out of me, I told them. The large-limbed man gave me a nasty grin. He said I certainly looked like someone who got easily scared. The woman said 'Naughty!' to the large-limbed man. 'You shouldn't be so cheeky towards people,' she said. She was smirking all over her face, even though she felt he had been the cheeky one. The large-limbed man simply grinned at what she said. The large-limbed man asked if I knew of any follow-on party. I was a bit nervous about the large-limbed man. I pretended to be having a think about it. I pretended I wanted to go with the man and the woman to a follow-on party I knew about. The man would probably be less aggressive if he thought I could take him to a follow-on party, and it would also feel good to be the one who knew of a follow-on party or two. I pursed my lips and said 'We-ell'. I shook my head and said 'No, wait a bit'. I mumbled that Einar wasn't going to have a follow-on party after all. I looked over at the large-limbed man again. He gazed up at me with a sour look on his face. I said I didn't know of any other follow-on party either. I smiled uncertainly at the large-limbed man, but he didn't take his gaze off me. His little pig's eyes bored into me. He asked me if I couldn't do a follow-on party

then. I just stood looking at the man. I couldn't manage to say anything right away. The woman turned to the large-limbed man. She gaped at him in amazement. 'Keep your hair on,' she said. 'You can't mean that,' she said. The large-limbed man just grinned. He turned to me and asked me if I had stuff to drink. I shook my head and said I was sorry but I hadn't. I stammered that all I had was a little homemade white wine. I said that the homemade white wine mainly tasted of yeast. I said that the white wine wasn't the sort of thing you could use for a follow-on party. The large-limbed man said that white wine sounded just the job to him. He suddenly got up from the edge of the pavement. 'Alright then, let's go,' the large-limbed man said. The woman put her head on one side and looked at him without saying anything. 'Well, honestly,' she said after a while. 'You can't bloody well mean it,' she said. The large-limbed man said of course he did. He bent down to the woman and whispered something. The woman shook her head and grinned. I felt uneasy with them whispering to each other like that. The woman grinned and muttered 'Good grief'. She sat there a little while longer, but finally shook her head and stood up. 'Alright, then,' she said. She went over to the large-limbed man and hooked her arm in under his. I found myself thinking of the chain at Skogtunet Orphanage when I saw that. There was a boy there who hit me with a chain, and my legs gave way the moment I was hit. The large-limbed man planted a bearlike paw on my shoulder. He asked me if I lived a long way away. I shook my head and said 'No'. I said I lived just down the road.

It took us just under thirty seconds to get to my flat. The large-limbed man walked so self-assuredly into my living room. I stood in the kitchen looking at him. His back was round and broad, and his bull-like neck shiny and gleaming. I was simply feeling more and more uncertain about the large-limbed man. I took two bottles of white wine out of the tall cupboard and went into the living room and sat down. We sat there and started to drink homemade white wine. I went over and put on a record of John Coltrane. I had got to like John Coltrane when I was in the special prison. The large-limbed man raised his glass and said 'Cheers!'. He downed the white wine at a single go. He gave a crooked smile as he put down the empty glass on the table. 'What a load of dishwater,' he said. He said it bloody tasted like must. I smiled wanly at the large-limbed man. He gazed up at me with a sour look on his face. He asked me if I hadn't got anything else than that stuff. He spit out his words when he spoke. He pointed at the drinks cabinet and asked me if I was sure I hadn't got something in there. He asked me if it was alright for him to check and then suddenly got up from the settee. He said I might possibly have forgotten something. 'Good grief!' the woman said. 'Is there no end to your cheek?' she said. 'What is it now, then?' the man said. The man had a smirk all over his face. I got up and said 'Oh yeah, just wait a moment.' I did my best to sound a bit surprised. I did my best to sound glad and positive. I pretended that I had forgotten something, and then I opened the drinks cabinet and took out my bottle of brandy. I said that I had somehow forgotten I had it. I asked them if they perhaps would like a brandy. He said they bloody well would like a brandy. The woman grinned and shook her head in resignation. She looked up at me with a slight chuckle, and then she nodded and said 'Yes, please'. I took the bottles of white wine out into the kitchen again. I thought the wine wasn't bad at all, but even so I poured the rest down the sink. 'The white wine was even worse than I thought,' I said. I started to swear out loud about how bad the white wine was. The large-limbed man said

'Alright, alright'. He told me to bring out the brandy. He laughed out loud in the living room. I carried three brandy glasses into the living room, put them on the table and poured out a couple of centilitres in each. The large-limbed man said it was a damn good brandy I had. I said they could just start drinking. He grinned and said 'Right, then'. He turned to the woman and grinned. He emptied his glass at a single go and then turned to face me again. 'Well, I'll take myself another one, then,' he said. The woman sat there, looking down at her thighs. She was grinning so hard her shoulders were shaking. The large-limbed man poured himself out another shot. He gave himself twice as much as I had filled in the glasses. He looked up at me again. His stern look was so frightening. He said he hoped it was alright for him to pour out for himself. I nodded and said of course it was. The large-limbed man said that was good to hear. The large-limbed man had a smirk all over his face. 'Well, cheers then!' he said. I raised my glass and toasted with both the man and the woman.

We sat there talking about various things. The woman mainly talked about astrology and tarot cards. The man said that astrology and tarot cards was a load of bloody tripe, but the woman claimed that everything she said had been scientifically proved. 'You surely can't deny that the moon has an effect on women's menstruation,' she said. 'And what about Nostradamus?' she said. The large-limbed man told her to belt up. He repeated that astrology was a load of bloody tripe. I said that I didn't know anything special about astrology and tarot cards. I added that it sounded pretty exciting, though. The large-limbed man turned round towards me. He stared angrily at me. He held my gaze for several seconds, and then suddenly burst out laughing. He swept the air with his hand and said he was only kidding me. I managed to squeeze out a sheepish laugh. I said I needed to have a pee. I'd already been out for a pee many times. I sat on the loo for a long while, then I flushed and went back into the living room. The woman asked me what I did during the daytime. I said it wasn't all that much, really. I said that I didn't have a job just at the moment. The large-limbed man looked straight at me. He asked me if perhaps I was unfit for employment. I couldn't think of anything to reply straight away. I sat there, my mouth half open, in front of the man and the woman. The woman slowly turned to the man. She lay her head on one side and looked at him. She said that now he ought to pull himself together a bit. She wasn't grinning at the man any more. It suddenly sounded as if she meant what she said. The large-limbed man still sat there grinning. He raised the glass to his lips. 'Only asking,' he said. 'No law against asking is there?' he said. I asked the woman what she did. The woman was just about to say what she did for a living when she was interrupted by the large-limbed man. 'She's in the intimate care business,' he said. He grinned at what he had said. I didn't think what he had just said was all that funny, but I forced myself to smile a bit. The woman wasn't smiling at all any longer. I stopped smiling when I could see she wasn't smiling. She shook her head and said 'huh' again. She said that was enough. She said that it wasn't funny any longer. The large-limbed man kept on grinning. He looked at the woman while he grinned. He said she didn't need to get sulky. The large-limbed man turned towards me. He nodded in the direction of the woman. 'Just look at how angry she is now,' he said. 'She's probably got her period,' he said. The large-limbed man held my gaze and grinned. 'Don't you think she's probably got her period?' he asked. I forced myself to give a crooked smile. 'Dammit,' the woman said. 'What's the matter

with you?' she said. The large-limbed man downed his brandy at one go. He kept on talking about women and menstruation. He talked about sulking women who had PMS and their periods. I hadn't the faintest idea what PMS was, but smiled uncertainly at what he said. The woman turned towards me after a while. She pursed her lips and did her best to ignore the man. She said that she was working as a home help at the moment. She started to explain how exhausting it was working as a home help. I sat listening to what she had to tell. The large-limbed man just sat there drinking brandy. He went on pouring them out for himself. Suddenly the woman turned to the large-limbed man. She asked him if he was thirsty today. He said he was extremely thirsty today, in actual fact. She said he wasn't all holding back either. She nodded towards the half-empty bottle of brandy and gave the large-limbed man an irritated look. The large-limbed man suddenly looked extremely annoyed. He pointed at me while he snarled at his woman. 'Didn't you hear what he said, then?' he snarled. 'He said we could go ahead and help ourselves, dammit.' The woman only gave a mocking laugh at what he said. He asked her what she was snorting at. She said there actually was something called good manners. He said she was a fine one to talk. The large-limbed man was now busy pouring out a really good-sized drink. He was talking very loudly, and I felt I ought to steer the conversation towards something else. Perhaps he would calm down if we talked about something else. 'You've certainly got a strong head for alcohol,' I said. 'I don't think I've ever seen anyone with a stronger head for alcohol,' I said. I smiled searchingly at the large-limbed man. He suddenly stared straight at me. He held my gaze, and refused to let go of it. This man was making me feel more and more nervous. He suddenly shook his head at me. 'Bloody twit,' he muttered, and then downed the brandy at a single go. He took the bottle and poured himself another brandy. He asked me if I hadn't thought of drinking anything. His voice was impatient and sharp. He was still staring hard at me. I said I didn't particularly feel like drinking any more right now. I said that I had drunk a lot of whisky earlier on that evening. He took a swig at his brandy. 'That's good to hear,' he said. He said that meant more for the others. He grinned to himself. The insect legs were simply itching more and more beneath my skin. I was getting more and more uneasy, and my toes were clawing away over each other. The large-limbed man nodded towards the stereo. He asked me if I didn't have some other music than that. I did my best to smile. I asked him if he didn't like jazz, then. He snorted and gave a toss of the head. 'It sounds like a swarm of bees,' he said. I went over to the CD rack and took a look at the CDs I had. After a while, I turned round and asked him what kind of music he liked. He said he liked all kinds of music. 'Apparently you don't like that sort,' the woman muttered. The large-limbed man spun round towards the woman. The woman avoided his look. She took hold of her brandy glass and raised it to her lips. She stared down into her brandy glass for a while. She took several cautious sips. The large-limbed man asked her if she was actually deaf. She didn't say anything. 'Are you deaf?' he asked her again. 'I said that I like all kinds of *music*,' he said. He stared at her, fuming. 'That's not music,' he said. The woman still didn't say anything. She just went on staring fixedly down at her brandy glass. I said that I didn't know what to put on. I said he could look to see if he could find anything. He said he bloody well would. He got up and went over to the CD rack. He took a look at my CDs. Meanwhile, John Coltrane was playing a lightning-speed sax solo in the background. 'Oh, No!,' the large-limbed man

exclaimed. He took off the CD with a sudden movement of his hand, and then turned round towards me. He grinned crookedly at me. He looked as if he had eaten a whole grapefruit. 'You don't think that that's good, do you?' he said. I said nothing. 'You surely won't claim that that's any good?' he said. I smiled uncertainly. 'Good grief,' the woman said. She was talking a lot louder than she had done earlier. She stared angrily at the large-limbed man. She said I could perfectly well like the record even though he didn't. The large-limbed man blew her a slow kiss. Her eyes were furious when he blew her the kiss. He said 'kissy-wissy' to the woman. The woman now stared him straight in the eye. Suddenly she started grinning at him. She grinned sarcastically and said 'Good god, how ridiculous you are when it comes to it.' She asked him if he wasn't going to say she was cute when she was angry. She said that was what men usually came out with when they couldn't find an answer. The large-limbed man grinned at her in a rage. He said he bloody well wasn't one to tell lies. He said she wasn't the slightest bit cute any longer. He said she had lost a helluva lot of weight recently. 'Take a look at yourself in the mirror, dammit,' he said. 'You're not exactly a spring chicken any longer,' he said. 'Even though you try and look as if you were,' he said. With those terrible leopard-skin trousers and the rest of it,' he said. He turned to me. 'Don't you think too that she looks a bit of a wreck?' he said. 'Just look at this,' he said. He took hold of her by the chin and tried to twist her head towards me. She broke free of his hand. He just grinned. He turned towards me again. 'Don't you think so?' he said. I couldn't say a word. 'Answer me, dammit,' he said. I felt so terribly scared and I was unable to answer. My heart pounded more and more in my chest, and I so wanted them to go away and leave me alone. The large-limbed man was still sitting there staring at me. 'Hey, you!' he said. 'Hello there!' he said. He waved a hand in front of my face. 'Contact, contact!' he said. He grinned and shook his head. He turned slowly to the woman. He grinned and looked at her. The woman wasn't grinning at all now. She was sitting staring in front of her. She was deadly serious now. 'Hallooo!' the large-limbed man shouted and waved his hand in front of her face. She didn't say anything. He shook his head and grinned. 'No, right then,' he said. He sat there sipping at his brandy for a while, then he suddenly got up from the settee. He said he didn't bloody intend to sit there any longer. He snorted through his nose loudly. He grabbed hold of my bottle of brandy. He said that now he was going to take the bottle of brandy with him. I didn't dare say anything. He crouched down in front of me. 'Is that OK with you?' He looked me straight in the eye and smiled hard. I didn't answer his question. Suddenly, he took in his breath and roared into my face. 'I asked you a question!' he roared. 'And when I ask you a question, you must answer me,' he roared. It tumbled out of me that he was welcome to the bottle. 'You see,' he said, completely calm. 'You can if you want to,' he said. 'Thanks,' he said. He laid a hand on my shoulder. He squeezed me frightfully hard on the shoulder, and my mouth formed an inaudible 'Ow!'. He slowly went out into the hall. 'Bye then,' he shouted after a little while. I sat rubbing my tender shoulder. I didn't say 'Bye then'. Nor did the woman say 'Bye then'. I heard the large-limbed man come towards us. He stood in the door and stared at us. He said he had just said 'Bye then'. He smiled at us in a rage. 'Bye then,' I mumbled. 'Bye then,' the woman mumbled. 'You see,' the man said. 'It's just as I said,' he said. 'You can if you want to,' he said. The large-limbed man turned round and left. 'Whoo,' the woman sighed, took her head in her hands and rumped her hair. Her hairstyle resembled a

bird's nest afterwards. The birds were singing away deep in the birch wood. I thought I could see a man pissing in the underwood over there. It was only half a second and then he was gone. I stood up on the ledge of rock and stared into the underwood. After a little while I sat down on the soft cushion of moss again. A placed a new wild strawberry on my tongue. I squashed the strawberry between tongue and palate. I felt the sweetness flood the cavity of my mouth. Suddenly, the rustling noise was there again. I leapt to my feet, and stared into the underwood. Nervousness coursed through my body. 'Is there anyone in there?' I asked. Nobody answered. The small birds sang away in the birch wood. I stared into the dense underwood. I stood there thinking about the man I had seen. A large man had stood pissing in the underwood over there. My chest was heaving fast, and I swallowed my tongue twice in a row. Someone was coming through the underwood. I asked who it was in there, but didn't get any answer. I saw a hand grasp a solid birch branch. The hand draw aside the birch branch, and someone came out from the underwood. It was the girl from next door who came out. The girl from next door was the cutest girl in the class. Her skin was dark and her black hair gleamed like a newly stained house in the summer sun. I'd had trouble with the girl from next door yesterday. She had smeared tiger balsam in my face yesterday, but now she was standing smiling in front of me. She asked me what I was doing there. I said I wasn't doing anything special. She was holding a small bucket in her hand. She said she was out looking for raspberries. 'Do you know where there are raspberries up here?' she asked. I waited a bit before replying. I knew where there were loads of raspberries, but the girl from next door had been so bloody nasty to me yesterday. I wasn't sure I wanted to tell her about my raspberry spot. She looked at me and smiled. She was so cute, and I just sat there looking at her. Finally I could do nothing else than simply tell her about my raspberry spot. I said that there were lots of raspberries over by the small heap of rocks. She asked me where the small heap of rocks was. I looked down at the wild strawberry plants and waited before answering. I started to finger one of the wild strawberry plants. 'Is it a secret?' the girl from next door asked. The girl from next door sounded so friendly today, but yesterday she and the popular boys in the class had smeared tiger balsam in my face. The tiger balsam caused my face to burn ice-cold. The popular boys in the class pressed me up against the white stove. The heating stove had long, thin bars, and I thought it looked like a skeleton at an elephant graveyard. I had seen elephant churchyards like this in my Tarzan magazines. Elephants are very melancholy creatures. Elephants are like butterflies when they flap their ears, but they're much too heavy to take off. Gradually elephants understand that they are unable to escape and they go away to the graveyard to lie down. Humans don't understand it is impossible to escape. Humans put up a fight just as long as they are able. I did my best to put up a fight, but I didn't have a chance of breaking loose. The girl from next door went on rubbing tiger balsam in my face. The popular boys let me go after a little while. One of the popular boys asked me if I was blubbing. He pointed at me and said I was blubbing like a little girl. The girl from next door shouted that I was a little mummy's boy. I turned round and shouted that her mother was a bloody whore. Suddenly the teacher was standing in the door. The teacher had come back from the teachers' room, and he had heard what I called the girl from next door. The teacher asked me what the hell I had just said. The teacher didn't normally swear, but now he was standing there

swearing out loud in the classroom. The teacher picked me up by one arm. He dragged me out of the classroom. My legs dragged along the floor, and one of my socks fell off and ended up lying beside the clothes cupboard. The teacher dragged me into the room where the copy machine stood. There was a strong smell of spirits in there. I didn't like the smell of spirits. Dad was extra strict when he'd been drinking spirits. Dad hadn't drunk any spirits for a long time now. He had been sober for several months now. He had felt so sorry for me because of that swelling, and he had stayed sober ever since we had been to that monster doctor. It turned out it was only a swelling of fat I had in my lower leg. Dad had been right that the swelling had been nothing to worry about. I was so uneasy that the teacher was sitting silent in front of me. I stared down at the grey formica table. I tried to count the lines in the table, but was unable to concentrate. The teacher asked me if my parents were at home. I mumbled that my father was at home. The teacher said I was to pack my things and go home straight away. The teacher said he would phone my father and have a talk with him in the meantime. I felt the squirrel's teeth start to eat away at my stomach. The teacher pointed to the exit. The squirrel gnawed and gorged away at my entrails, and I really regretted having said that dad was at home. I got up and went over to the door. I put my hand on the handle and opened the door. The teacher told me to wait for a moment. He stared seriously at me. He said I was to apologise to the girl from next door before I went home. I went quickly back to the classroom.

The other pupils were lined up over by the shoe cupboard. The girl standing at the front of the queue was clearing her throat, deep down. She held up my sock in front of her for a little while and then she spat down into the sock. Then she gave the sock to the next one in the queue. I went straight over to my desk. I placed the green integrated studies textbook in my satchel. I put my felt tips in my pen-case and stuffed the pen-case in my satchel. One of the popular boys came over with my sock. I refused to take it. The popular boy stuffed the sock in my satchel. I took it out and threw it into the corner. I didn't apologise to the girl from next door, but went straight out of the classroom. I went slowly home. Dad was at home waiting for me, and I felt more and more uneasy. Dad had probably already heard from the teacher. Dad could be very strict. My feet took me home at a snail's pace. I took off my shoes in the passage. I took plenty of time untying my shoes. Afterwards I put them neatly up on the shoe rack and went along the passage. Dad was standing in the passage, casting a shadow. He looked furious even though he was sober. Dad no longer felt sorry for me. Suddenly I found myself crying. 'Don't try that one on, either,' dad said. He said that snivelling had no effect on him. He took me into my room. He took off my trousers and pants and lay me over his knee. He began to hit me with the palm of his hand. It was a painful applause he gave me. His hand etched itself into my backside. Afterwards he pushed me onto the bed and got up. He stood there in the middle of the room and pointed at me. 'I never want to hear the teacher complain about you again,' he said. 'Have you got that?' he said. He left the room before I had time to say anything. He locked the door from the outside. I lay on the bed and cried. I said to myself that I hated the girl from next door and the popular boys. I bit as hard as I could in the pillow and hoped dad would die.

A couple of hours later, dad came back into my room. Dad came over to my bed. He smelled of spirits now. He put his head on one side and looked at

me while he cautiously stroked my hair. I really regretted wishing he was dead. Dad had been so nice to me recently, and I didn't want him to die. 'There there, now' dad said. He wiped the tears away from my cheek. The back of his hand glistened afterwards. 'There there,' he said again. He said I must promise not to say anything like that again. I said he felt so disappointed when I behaved badly at school. I said I must promise to be good at school from now on. I promised never to behave badly at school again. He nodded and said that was good. 'Then we won't think about that any more,' he said. Dad got up again. He was about to leave the room when he stopped and stood there looking at me. I was sitting up in bed crying. I had just wished dad was dead. I saw him dead in my mind's eye, and I so regretted what I had wished. I caught sight of the football dad had bought for me the previous summer. Dear old dad who'd bought me a red football. The red football was lying under my bench now. The football was almost grey with dust now. I was one of the worst football players in the class. I was so afraid of getting the ball in the face, and I'd never used the football he gave me. Poor dad had toiled away to buy me a present and had had to see his present lying there unused. And now I had even wished dad dead. I so terribly regretted I had wished him dead. It was the girl from next door and the popular boys who were responsible for all this. I hated the girl from next door and the popular boys, and I would get my revenge on all of them. Dad couldn't help any of this. Heavy sobs welled up in my chest. Dad sat down on the edge of the bed again. There was a strong smell of spirits coming from his mouth. I didn't want dad to die and I managed to gasp out that I was fond of him. That was all I managed to say before I started to weep a flood of tears. Normally I'm pretty good at holding my tears back, but now I cried loudly and uncontrollably. Dad held me close. I could feel his red-spotted neck against my cheek. His skin was so warm and smooth. He said he was fond of me too. He said he had had to spank me because I had to understand I had to behave properly. He said that he really was fond of me, even though he had spanked me. He held me really close while he rocked me gently backwards and forwards. 'Silly chap,' he said. 'Silly little chap,' he said. I rubbed the corners of my eyes with the bottom joint of my forefingers. I sniffed and gave some low gasps. Dad gently ruffled my hair. He sat there looking at me for a while. He asked me if I felt any better. I nodded and mumbled 'Yes'. He said in that case I'd better go and wash my face. He told me to wash away the tears so mum wouldn't see anything. He said we needn't let mum know anything about this. He ruffled my hair cautiously and asked me if I didn't think that was the best thing to do. I nodded and said 'Yes'. This is just between us men,' he said. 'OK?' he said. I felt a bit grown-up when dad called me a man, and I didn't feel I could sit there snivelling any longer. I went out into the bathroom and started to wash my face. The water poured out of the tap. I thought I had seen a man pissing in the underwood, but it was only the girl from next door I had seen. I waited for a bit before answering about where the small heap of rocks was. The girl from next door was so cute, and besides that I didn't need to take revenge when she was so friendly. The girl from next door looked down at the ledge of rock and said 'Ooh!'. The girl from next door asked if there were wild strawberries here too. She sat down next to me. She was so friendly towards me, and I had nothing against doing her a favour in that case. I felt the eagerness coursing through my body. I said I could show her the spot for the raspberries right away. I said it wasn't all that far away. I looked wide-eyed at the girl from next door and pointed in the

direction of the small heap of rocks. The girl from next door shaded her eyes from the sun and looked up at me. I had never been alone with the girl from next door before. She was much nicer when you were alone with her. I nodded eagerly and pointed in the direction of the raspberry spot. 'That can wait for some other time,' she said. She didn't smile when she said that. She bent forwards and started to pick wild strawberries again. All my eagerness was sucked back into my body at once. There were a few seconds' silence. I sat watching the girl from next door pick my wild strawberries. I blurted out that this was actually my strawberry spot. The girl from next door looked up at me again. 'No it isn't,' she said. I said I was the one who had discovered the strawberry spot. I told her she could find her own strawberry spot. She said she hadn't seen any sign with my name on. I repeated that I was the one who had been here first. She said that didn't make it my spot. I began to get very het up. I started to get angry with the girl from next door again. Just let the girl from next door try and call me a goldfish again. I started working my jaws and stared angrily and darkly at the girl from next door. She had smeared tiger balsam in my face yesterday. The teacher had been furious when I called her mother a whore, and dad had been so disappointed that he started drinking when he heard about it. It was the girl from next door and the popular boys who were responsible for everything, and I could have spit on the lot of them. I said I'd never tell her where the raspberry spot was. She said she didn't give a damn where the raspberry spot was. A thorny thicket exploded inside my stomach. I struck her on the cheek with the flat of my hand. I didn't mean to hit as hard as I did. The girl from next door lost her balance. She flailed the air with her arms as she toppled backwards. Her eyes grew the size of marbles, and then she toppled over the edge of the ledge. She dropped onto the scree below. It was several metres down to that scree.