

Bjarte Breiteig

Forward

The letter came in August, by which time we had almost stopped waiting for it. Elisabet stood by the plum tree and thinned out the unripe fruit. She smiled at me as I came through the gate with the post. It had been a sunny summer and we had spent the holidays in the garden, for the most part each with a book, and she had bleach lines on her temples because of her sunglasses. I gave her the letter, which I had already opened, and while she read it I lifted a branch and began to remove some plums at random. They were the size of acorns and hung closely together under the soft leaves. I threw them onto the compost heap, one by one, as I picked them off. As early as Monday, said Elisabet. Yes, I said. It doesn't say how long you'll be there, she said. They talked of a week, I said, but it depends, of course. When I turned round she looked the other way and I knew she was going to cry. I watched her as she went across the lawn to the kitchen door. She was wearing tight, old trousers that I had not seen for a long time, and her waist was bare. The feeling of lust pricked me.

On Sunday evening she drove me to the station. I was there early. It had begun to grow dark and the scattered lamps were lit as we stood and waited. People passed with rucksacks and suitcases which they carried onboard the carriages. At the front, by the engine, stood some men in overalls who stowed goods from a truck in through a large hatch. Elisabet had folded her arms across her chest. It had been close that day, but the evening was chilly. I said that the best she could do was to sleep as much as possible. Tor, she said. I put my arms round her. I felt how thin she

was. I'll go onboard now, I said. She nodded. I took the suitcase, climbed onboard the train and went back towards the sleeping cars. I had a place in a two-berth cabin. There was no one there when I arrived but there was an unfamiliar toothbrush in a plastic glass on the shelf below the mirror. I pushed my suitcase into the baggage shelf by the door and went over to the window. Elisabet still stood on the platform. It took a while before she caught sight of me. She walked along and stood directly outside and it looked as though she wanted to say something. I signalled to her that the window could not be opened. She nodded. She rubbed her bare upper arms. We looked at each other for perhaps a minute. Then she lowered her gaze, turned around and left.

I hung the suit jacket on a peg by the window, locked the door and lay down on the lower bunk. After a while my thoughts began to fade and I dozed off. I could not have been out for long when I was awoken by a man who stood bent over me touching my arm. Excuse me, you are lying on my bed, he said. He pointed at his ticket, which he held up in front of me. I got up slowly so as not to become dizzy. It had become dark in the compartment and the train had begun to move. I had barely stood up before the man grinned and began to slap me on the shoulder. But of course, it's you, Tor! he said. I looked at him. He had a pale double chin which bulged over his shirt collar and he smelt faintly of alcohol. There was nothing I recognized about him. Don't you remember me? he asked. No, I said. It's Wimp. He looked at me expectantly. Wimp? I said. He laughed a little. That was what you all called me, he said. I said that I didn't remember any Wimp, he must have mixed me up with someone else. No, no, no. He tapped me on the chest. You are Tor, right? Yes, I

said. Yes, then we know one another, he said. With that he lay down on the lower bunk, as I had just lain. He put his arms behind his head and looked at me. His shirt had wet patches under the arms. So you don't remember the big boy in Class C? he asked. No, I said. The fat boy that you all called Wimp? I did not answer. I looked out of the window. A town glided by and people played football on a flood-lit pitch. But I remember you well, said Wimp behind me. Tor with the blond hair. Tor with the BMX bike. Tor who showed his behind when the bus went past. So now you're going to Sweden? he asked. Yes, I said. Business? I shook my head. I need an operation, I said. And you have to go all the way to Sweden? he asked. I turned round. He lay there smiling. I saw that there was something familiar about him after all, but could not place him. He pulled out a hip flask out of his trouser pocket, took a gulp and then held it out for me. It was warm after being against his leg and violently burnt my throat when I drank it. I gave the flask back to him, lifted the suit jacket down from the peg and took my time about putting it on. Wimp's hand gripped around the bar that was there to stop people rolling out of the bunk. Are you going? he asked. I need a beer before I go to bed, I said. He winked at me. Of course, he said, of course.

It was a modern train with doors that slid open before I had chance to touch them. People sat reclined in the seats, with gazes that turned aside when I caught them. There were no passengers in the restaurant car. I got a beer and sat myself at a table by the window. While I drank, I stared through my reflection and out into the darkening night. Perhaps it was the heat, or that I had not eaten for some time, I don't know, but the alcohol worked straight away. I finished the beer and bought myself another one.

Sometimes the train suddenly twisted and gave me the impression of gliding, and for the few seconds it lasted, I closed my eyes and imagined I was flying across the landscape. Half way through my third beer, the phone began to vibrate in my inside pocket. I took it out, but was so out of it that I just sat and looked at her name on the display and thought that a conversation would not bring us closer to one another. When it had stopped ringing, I switched the phone off and put it back into my pocket. Aren't you going to answer it? asked a voice behind me. It was Wimp, who had come in and stood by the counter. The waitress glanced at me over a stack of plastic-wrapped muffins. She was about to pour him a beer. I said: I'm not always in the mood to talk. Wimp got his beer, paid and sat himself down at my table. So you don't want to talk to your wife, he asked. I leant forward in my chair. You obviously know a good deal about me, don't you, I said. He shrugged his shoulders. There isn't always that much to know, he said. I drank my beer. He did the same, and I could see our dim reflection in the window; we both had grey suit jackets and the same hair colour. He said: By the way, it's quite normal for the unsuccessful person to remember the successful person, and not the other way round. I asked: So, do you see yourself as unsuccessful? Yes, he said. He looked straight at me. He leaned right back in his chair and held his glass steady on one leg. Do you know, he said, I used to admire you. Why? I asked. He shrugged his shoulders: You were self-confident, the girls liked you, all that sort of thing. But one day I stopped, he added. Admiring me? I asked. He nodded.

It was the year everyone had kites, said Wimp. Do you remember? There were kites everywhere you went. As soon as there was the smallest

breath of wind, up they came from car parks and football pitches. I nodded. I remembered that. There had been an epidemic that spread over the area and disappeared again as quickly as it had appeared. People had bought kits by mail order from Japan and Korea; big box kites with flags and pennants, while others constructed their own in woodwork class. Wimp remembered my kite well. It was the best kite he had ever seen. It was made of real parachute silk, the fabric was completely black and it resembled an enormous bat. I had almost forgotten it, but now the memories came flooding back as Wimp spoke. One day when there was a fresh breeze blowing, my kite had got caught on a crane, which at the time stood on the hillside below the school, and the string had become snagged at the top. Wimp described the group that had formed at the base of the crane, how excitedly they stood there while I climbed over the safety barrier and up the narrow ladder in the centre of the support column. I climbed up past the driver's cabin and up to the point where the ladder stopped. There they could see me lie flat out and begin to crawl along the arm; but I had only gone a short way before I lay motionless. Then panic began to spread on the ground. They thought I had fainted and would fall off at any moment. They started to shout to me. Tor! they shouted. Tor, Tor wake up! They stared at my face, which was only a small, white dot. Finally someone ran off across the hillside to tell the adults.

Wimp took a mouthful of beer. I realized that I was smiling. Were you all really afraid? I asked. Of course, he said. But you can bet I envied you. Imagine having a whole group of people standing there calling to you. And how we cheered when you came down, even if you hadn't got near

the kite. He lowered his voice and looked towards the dark window.

The following day it was blowing a fresh gale, he said. And it was then he decided: He would do that which I had not done. At dusk he stood by the crane again, all on his own this time. It was growing dark, but far above he could see how the kite blew in the wind and tugged at the line so that the whole crane vibrated. In his pocket was his army knife, which he would use to cut it loose. He told me of how he had set off upwards and felt the wind take hold almost immediately. He was quite a fat slob in those days, so it was a bit of an effort and his hands quickly became numb on the cold steel. Spread out below him were the houses, their lights and the bridge where the cars drove in a steady stream. The school yard was lit by blue-white lights that threw small patches over the asphalt and he could see the secret place, behind the rubbish container, where he used to go and hide. The whole thing seemed so small and pitiful. When he reached the driver's cabin he climbed in to rest for a while. A half-full coffee mug was standing there, which he dropped out of the door and watched as it slowly fell and bounced against the ladder steps and bars before disappearing into the darkness. Then he climbed the last bit before beginning to crawl out along the arm. The wind forced cold tears from the corners of his eyes and he imagined that the rest of us were standing at the foot of the crane and were afraid and shouted to him that he should turn back. But never in his life would he turn back. He crawled across the great void between the bars and felt how the arm swayed more and more the further out he went. It was further to the end than he had thought and when he finally got there his arms were completely exhausted from the strain. He lay there and watched the kite. It resembled an angry dragon as it threw itself back and forth in the darkness, while the stretched material

fluttered and crackled. There was a tear in one side and that was what it was that made it so noisy. It was as though it suffered, said Wimp, and took another mouthful of beer. Suffered? I said. He nodded and blinked his eyes a few times. He told me of how he had shakily got to his feet on the bars while he held on to the upper beam with one hand and took hold of the line with the other. But when he was going to pull the kite towards him, he found that the wind was too strong and eventually he leaned himself on the upper beam, wrapped the line round his hand a few times and cut it off just below where he was holding it. At that moment he felt how powerful the kite was. It was stronger than any person and he let go of the knife and clung onto the line with both hands, knowing that he could be tipped backwards at any moment.

While Wimp talked the waitress had cleaned the tables and now she was about to close. She flashed the ceiling lights to make us leave. Wimp sat and stared down at his empty glass. And then, I asked, what happened then? He looked up at one of my shoulders. What happened was that I started to believe in God, he said. So you're a Christian? I asked. He shook his head. God is not God, he said. He wanted to say something more. It was stuck somewhere inside him, and he lifted his glass to his mouth but discovered that it was empty and so put it down again. And then you stopped admiring me? I asked. He nodded. Since then I have never really admired anyone or anything, he said. I looked out of the window. Somewhere above us the power line sparked and lit the landscape up for a moment. I caught a glimpse of a forage harvester that stood abandoned in a field and a stone wall that disappeared into the darkness. A conductor came through the carriage and stopped in front of

us. Is one of you Tor Karlsen? he asked. It's him, said Wimp and nodded towards me. There's a telephone call for you, said the conductor. I asked if it was anything serious. He did not answer, but gave me a friendly look. You can come with me, he said. I glanced at Wimp before I went, but he did not meet my gaze. He just sat with his head bowed and rubbed a reddish rash on his neck.

I followed the conductor forward through the train. He unlocked a door with a key that he had hanging on an extendable cord, and we went in through a dark goods room. In a glass-walled enclosure sat a uniformed man, watching a video with a listless expression. Innermost in the room, a sliding door stood half opened to the driver's compartment and a telephone hung by the side. The conductor smiled and turned away. I put the receiver next to my ear and said hello, but no one answered. Elisabet, I said, what is it? Then her voice was there. It was the darkness, was all she said. Is it the same now? I asked. She asked why I had switched my telephone off. It was the battery, I said. I heard her breathing in the receiver. In the driver's cab a red-haired man sat leaning back in his seat and talked to someone who was out of my field of vision. It looked comfortable in there. In front of the train the lights cast a ghost-like gleam on the rails which ran on and on in the darkness. Suddenly they twisted over to one side and the train went rushing into a bend while it emitted a blast. What was that? said Elisabet. Just the train, I said. Oh, she said. I thought it was a siren. I asked if she was in the living room. She was, and I knew where she was sitting: in the leather chair with a rug pulled over her, while she stared at the drawn curtains. I told her that I had met an old acquaintance. She wanted to know who it was, and I said that it

was Wimp. Wimp? she said. That was what we called him, I said. Was he someone you bullied? she asked. I don't know, I said, I don't remember him. He remembers me, but I don't remember him. Elisabet sounded despairing: Oh no, she said, that's your memory again. I said nothing. Why did you bully him? she asked. I noticed that I was irritated. I don't know, I said. I really don't remember. Oh Tor, she said. Relax, I said, it is quite normal that you forget those who... Those who what? she asked. No, I said, nothing. I began to talk about something else. I asked how she had got hold of the number out here, what she had said to be able to talk to me. She did not answer. But you must have said something, I said. I said that you were sick, she said. I said that perhaps we would never meet again. But Elisabet, I said. She began to cry. I didn't know what else to say, she said. Well, I said. It doesn't matter now. We're not superstitious either, are we? I tried to laugh. It is so dark here, she said crying. No it's not, I said, it's just that you see it that way, you know that. That Wimp, she said, you must apologize to him. Yes, I said. Promise? Yes, I said. Tor, she said, do you love me? Elisabet, I said. She laughed a little and sniffled into the receiver. After a while I said: I am going to go now. I love you, I said. Then I put the phone down. I sat by the telephone for a while, just in case she rang back. Inside the driver's cab, the red-haired man put his hand on a lever and pushed it forwards. The train's speed increased. He noticed that I stood watching and he nodded to me. Everything OK? he asked. It's just my wife, she's a little..., I said. He smiled. It's like that, you know, he said and pushed the sliding door to.

I went back to the restaurant car. The lights were out and a shutter had been pulled down over the counter. There was no one there. I went further

back, through the carriages that now lay in darkness and into the sleeping compartment. Wimp was not there. The hip flask lay on the pillow and there was a red sports bag on the floor in front of the sink. I sat down on his bunk, leaned back against the wall and took a gulp from the flask. I stayed sitting there, but Wimp did not come back, and eventually I must have fallen asleep, as the next thing I remember was that it was light outside, that I had a headache and that the quilt was damp from the brandy. I got up and rinsed my face with water from the feeble stream in the sink. My gaze fell on Wimp's toothbrush. Freezer tape was wrapped around the handle to give a better grip. The sight of it made me uneasy and I decided to take a walk towards the front of the train. I went all the way forward to the engine without seeing Wimp and on the way back I checked the toilets as I passed them. I tried the exit doors to see if they could be opened while the train was moving but they could not, and neither could the windows. The passengers had woken up and little by little began to gather in the corridors. I went back to the sleeping car and stayed there on Wimp's bed until the train arrived. Outside people streamed out onto the platform. After a few minutes there was a knock on the door. It was the conductor who said that he was just going round checking that everyone was awake. I asked if he had seen anything of the big man in the suit jacket who I had talked with the evening before. He thought about it, but could not remember having seen him. He must have got off at one of the stations along the way, he said. I nodded. He must have done, I said.

It felt right to take Wimp's baggage with me. I put the toothbrush and the hip flask into the bag, which turned out to be empty, with the exception

of a whiplash collar made of plastic and foam rubber. Then I took the bag and my own suitcase and went out. An escalator brought me up into the arrivals hall, where the sun was already shining in through the large glass windows. Outside on the steps I stood and looked up the unfamiliar streets, where people hurried past. I went down to the taxi rank and climbed into the back seat of the first car. To the hospital, I said.