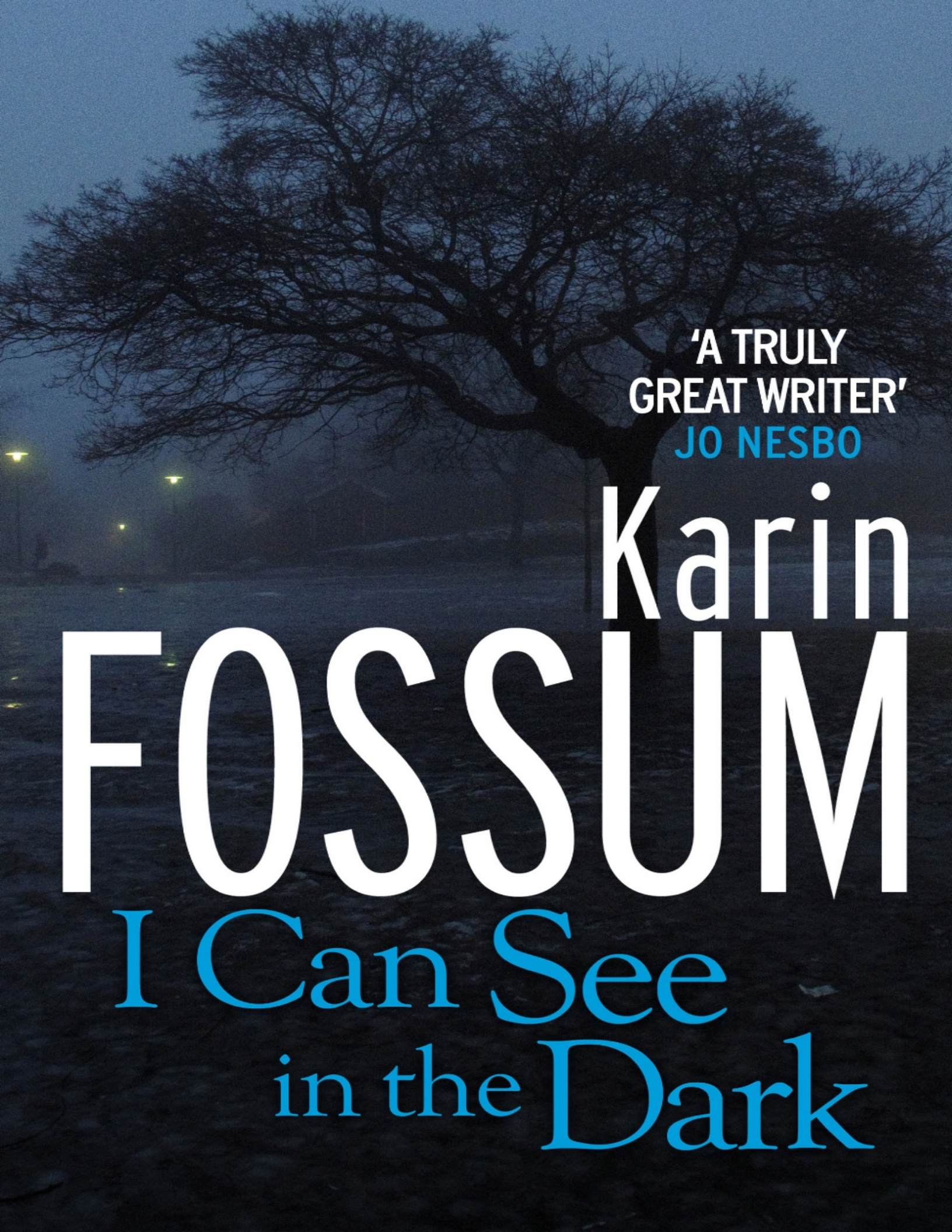
'A TRULY GREAT WRITER'
JO NESBO
Karin
FOSSUM
I Can See in the Dark

Contents

About the Book

Riktor doesn’t like the way the policeman comes straight into the house without knocking. He doesn’t like the arrogant way he observes his home.The policeman doesn’t tell him why he’s there, and Riktor doesn’t ask. Because he knows he’s guilty of a terrible crime.

But it turns out that the policeman isn’t looking for a missing person. He is accusing Riktor of something totally unexpected. Riktor doesn’t have a clear conscience, but this is a crime he certainly didn’t commit.

About the Author

Karin Fossum began her writing career in 1974. She has won numerous awards, including the Glass Key Award for the best Nordic crime novel, an honour shared with Henning Mankell and Jo Nesbo, and the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize. Her highly acclaimed Inspector Sejer series has been published in more than thirty countries.

Also by Karin Fossum

Broken

The Inspector Sejer Series

In the Darkness

Don’t Look Back

He Who Fears the Wolf

When the Devil Holds the Candle

Calling Out For You

Black Seconds

The Water’s Edge

Bad Intentions

The Caller

I Can See in the Dark

Karin Fossum

Translated from the Norwegian by James Anderson

Harvill *Secker*
LONDON

Chapter 1

THERE'S NOTHING BEAUTIFUL about her, and she has no control. She can't control her eyes, which dart about, or roll up into her head, so that only the glistening whites are visible. Or her body, which does what it likes. Her skin is stretched tight over her joints, the veins giving her a greenish pallor, and she's as thin as a small bird. Children shouldn't look like this. Children should be plump, pink and warm, soft as rubber and full of sparkling life. I assume her condition was caused by an injury during birth.

She's about nine or ten and confined to a wheelchair.

Her mother calls her Miranda, a daft name, well, in my opinion anyway. Her hair is very fine and fair, and gathered in a knot at the top of her head. Her hands move about restlessly, white, claw-like hands that are incapable of doing anything. You'd think she was attached to an electric current. That someone was switching it on and off, sending shocks through her delicate body. I get very twitchy watching little Miranda. Worn out by all these spasms, this constant agitation, I feel like screaming. If she really were powered by electricity, I'd want to pull the plug. I'd enjoy seeing her jerking body relax.

Miranda can't speak. She only makes noises and unintelligible exclamations; I can't understand any of it, even though I've had plenty of experience with all sorts of helplessness. I've worked in nursing homes for more than seventeen years.

I often see Miranda here, because they come to the park by Lake Mester every day without fail. Like me, they follow a routine, something they can cling to, a groove that feels

safe. The young mother takes care of the little thing; she hasn’t any choice. One heady moment with a man has turned into a lifelong burden. If anyone else comes into the park, she glances up quickly, but without any anticipation of adventure. What kind of man would approach this pair, willingly take on these problems, the ever-present child, ceaselessly gesticulating and yammering all day long?

Carrying the child about.

Wheeling the child around.

Never watching her run across the floor.

I go to the park at various times of the day because I work shifts, and I’m often free when others are at work. I’ve been coming here a long time, and I take note of all the other people who enjoy sitting on the benches admiring the fountain and its splashing water. The sound of the water has a strangely analgesic effect. For those of us who live with pain. I don’t sleep much, and the nights are long and agonising. I try to maintain my grasp of reality, and I don’t think people notice anything peculiar about me, either here in the park or where I work at Løkka Nursing Home. My manner is calm and friendly, and I do what I’m told; I simply mimic the others who stay within the norm. It’s easy. I talk like them, laugh like them, tell funny stories. But with all the feeble elderly people under my care, things often slide out of control. Especially for those who can’t speak, or haven’t the strength to complain.

Maybe they think: I don’t want to live, I don’t want to die. Life becomes so impossible as it nears its end. They just lie there clutching at a duvet, sightless, voiceless and unable to hear. Without any desire for the dregs of life, and full of fear for death.

I like sitting in the park and watching the people. They look so vulnerable on the green benches in the sun, with their eyes fixed on the lovely fountain. Three dolphins, each spouting a jet of water from its mouth. The park is small and

pretty, quite intimate in its way, but the benches are hard and have armrests of cast iron. I almost envy Miranda her wheelchair and the pillow at her back. And the rug over her legs in the evenings, when it gets chilly. Her mother chain-smokes. She throws the butt on the ground and immediately lights another, inhaling so hard her cheeks are sucked in. She, too, is fettered to that chair with its large wheels. But there *is* something between them, I think, as I watch them surreptitiously. A frail bond, because it's needful, because they have to fulfil these roles, play this game, mother and child.

Sometimes I go to the park and find it deserted, but I love sitting there alone on my green bench. The park is my own little kingdom then, and I'm in complete control. I'm responsible for everything. I make the water tinkle, I make the flowers bloom, and if I wish, I make the birds sing. I force the wind softly through the leaves, I chase the clouds across the sky, and if I'm in a good mood, I'll add a butterfly or a woolly bumblebee.

I think about Miranda's mother a lot. Occasionally she glances at me, entreatingly, like a beggar.

Take me away from all these problems, the glance says. I want a different life.

That's what everyone wants, surely.

Chapter 2

AT THE ENTRANCE to the park, just as you turn in along a narrow, paved path, there is a beautiful sculpture.

Woman Weeping.

I'm not well travelled, but I've never seen anything like it, never seen anything so lovely and so riveting as this sculpture. I've never seen anyone cry the way she's doing. She's on her knees, she's succumbed to it completely, weighed down with suffering and grief. Her hands hide her face, her long hair has fallen forwards, her shoulders are hunched in hopeless despair. It's heartening that an artist has got to grips with the anguish we all feel. Our sorrow about life itself, the torment of existence, braving each of its seconds and minutes, tolerating the gaze of others. There are plenty of other wonderful sculptures. Beautiful women with outstretched arms, athletic men, chubby, laughing children.

But give me *Woman Weeping*.

Give me the truth about human beings and life.

She's cast from gilded bronze which has a lovely lustre. When the sun streams through the leaf canopy she turns warm and golden like an ember. In winter her body is as cold as ice, with its round shoulders and the narrow back, through which vertebrae protrude like marbles beneath the skin. When no one is looking, I stroke her slender body, her long legs, her slim ankles.

But my thoughts constantly return to Miranda.

She needs help with everything the whole time, I often think about that, help from morning to night, every hour, all round the clock. Help when she's thirty and when she's

forty. At some point her mother won’t be there any more, and who will look after her then? It’s just this sort of helpless case that ends up at the nursing home where I work, that ends up at Løkka. Then, they’re handed over to me with all my quirks and fancies, my outbursts and attentions. Within me lurks an evil little devil, who occasionally asserts himself, he’s impossible to avoid, because sometimes the temptation is too great. I’d never have believed it of Riktor, people would say in all their ignorant innocence, if they knew the truth about me and the things I’m capable of. I can see right through people, I can see what’s concealed in their innermost, shadowy recesses. And when it comes to evil, I can believe anything of anybody.

Chapter 3

OUR WARD SISTER Anna Otterlei is an exception.

The well-being of the patients is much more than a career choice, it's her life's mission, or so it seems, and she's quite inexhaustible. She's loving, self-sacrificing and serene, she cares and comforts, she nurses and soothes. She's constantly in their rooms, sitting on a chair by the bed, speaking softly and confidingly, stroking their cheeks with a warm hand. She finds out what they need and what they dream of, she shares the sorrows of a lifetime which will soon be at an end. She partakes in their fear of death, that final, slow descent into darkness. Personally, I can't be bothered. If you extend a hand, you only receive tears and despair in return, these are doors I don't want to open, I have enough of my own as it is. I've enough of my own pounding heart, with all the whisperings in the corners, evil tongues that know, perhaps, what I really am.

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Sometimes at night, a lorry drives into my bedroom; it comes roaring through the door and parks next to my bed. Its diesel engine goes throbbing on until dawn. I'm worn out by the time I finally put my feet on the floor. On the other side of the bed. Silence frightens me even more, because I've lived my whole life in this din, with these voices and this noise.

But then there's my angel, Sister Anna. She's lovely, but she's also sharp, like a cake with sweet icing and a bitter little berry in the middle. She's the one I'm most cautious

with. The rest of the staff on the ward aren't clever enough to see through me, they haven't the sensitivity for unravelling human riddles. And I am one such human riddle.

If only I had a woman! A woman like Sister Anna, with her beauty and her wisdom, her indomitable desire to be good. She's blonde and bosomy and beautiful, with a high, arched brow and plump cheeks, like a small, well-nourished child. Lips red as cherries, a neck like a swan's, eyes that seem to gaze down from on high, with the barest twinkle in them. She's about the same age as me, in her early forties. And although she's constantly looking in my direction, it's not with any desire or yearning. I have none of the qualities women dream of. But I like being near her, catching the scent and the warmth of her; she warms like a stove. She shines like a sun. She sails like a ship. Truly, she's a woman after my own depraved heart.

Everyone has virtues, everyone has a talent, everyone has a right to respect. That's how we human beings like to think. But rotten individuals do exist and, I have to admit it, I'm one of them; a rotten individual who in certain situations can turn spiteful, to the extent that I become almost unhinged. But I find no difficulty in aping other people, aping politeness and friendliness and kindness. It's restraining the bad impulses that's tough. I often think of the things that might happen if I really lost control, and that does happen from time to time.

But then there's Sister Anna, pretty little Anna, she is the angel in the human story. Sometimes, when she comes along the corridor, I go weak and wobbly at the knees. But the joy of kissing Anna's cherry-red lips will never be mine. I know too much about the commerce of love.

Chapter 4

I LIVE AT Jordahl on the outskirts of town, I have a small red house half an hour's walk from the park by Lake Mester. It was built in 1952, with that typical end-of-war restraint, spartan, simple and practical. Living room and kitchen, bedroom and bathroom, and that's all. Two old, wrought-iron stoves that purr throughout the winter, a large, covered veranda where I sit and watch the people who pass by. It's easy to maintain, with heavy furniture that has no decorative refinement. There's a forest at the back of the house, of spruce and birch. The house used to have a lovely lawn in front, but now it's completely overgrown. Occasionally, during the summer I cut it with a scythe, and I enjoy playing the Grim Reaper. I feel at home in the part.

It takes me forty minutes to walk to the nursing home at Løkka. And I walk whatever the weather, even though the bus stops at the entrance. There's something about walking, it orders the thoughts, puts them into perspective. My house is on a rise, facing west; and in the evenings the sun shines through my living-room window like a great, glowing sphere. It hangs there a moment casting a golden glow, until the rooms shimmer with heat, then it sinks behind a stand of trees. Slowly, everything turns blue.

All the shrubs and trees, and the wooded hillsides in the distance.

It's then that my head begins to seethe. Billions of tiny creatures swarm through my brain, digging tunnels and severing the essential communications I need to be able to think, reason and plan. Good deeds and bad, it varies, I've

so many irons in the fire. Normally I go to the window, and stand there looking out, waiting for everything to calm down. And sometimes there really is a hush. As when someone switches off a flow of words. Then I find the silence troubling and immediately switch on the radio or television just to hear voices. Sometimes, when I’m with people, I find I’m on the verge of panic for no reason whatever. I assume a friendly expression so that no one will see what’s happening to me, that I’m existing in chaos.

I’ve never mentioned any of this to a doctor. Even though we have a doctor on the ward and I could have confided in him. We are colleagues, after all. You see, I might have said to Dr Fischer, my head begins to seethe when the sun goes down. It’s like thousands of ants, like a swarm of crawling insects. There are whispers in the corners of my bedroom, and an articulated lorry parks next to my bed. Its engine idles the whole night long, and I can hardly breathe for all the diesel fumes. But you don’t go telling people things like that. Although he’s a doctor, it would make him think, and I don’t want to cause myself embarrassment.

Chapter 5

I CAN SEE bushes and trees, buildings, posts and fences, I can see them all vividly glowing and quivering, long after dark. I see the heat they emit, a sort of orange-coloured energy, as if they're on fire. I once mentioned this to the school nurse when I was about ten. That I could see in the dark. She simply patted me on the cheek and then smiled sadly, the way you smile at an inquisitive child with a lively imagination. But once bitten twice shy: I never mentioned it again. Sometimes at night, when it's impossible to sleep, when the lorry has been standing at my bedside for hours and filled the entire room with exhaust fumes, I get dressed and go out and stand on the drive. I watch the moving creatures in the landscape, everything that hides from the noise and light of day. A fox darting over the fields, a deer bounding across the road, everything pulsing with this amber light.

The living-room windows give on to the drive and the road, while the kitchen window looks out on the forest of tall trees. This gives me a sense of living in seclusion, but I have got neighbours. Just below me is Kristian Juel's house; he minds his own business and doesn't bother me much, for which I'm grateful. Next door, up the hill, is a family with young children. They do a lot of screaming and shouting and bouncing on a large trampoline, as well as chasing a small dog that barks the whole time. Sometimes, on light summer nights, I hear the laughter and barking, and think they sound like church bells carried on the air. At other times, they get on my nerves, and I feel like screaming.

But then there’s our ward sister Anna.
Elegant, warm and radiant.
There isn’t her equal anywhere.

Once, when I was a child, a classmate announced in a malicious, jeering way that I looked like a pike. It was probably because my jaw protrudes slightly and I have sharp, crooked teeth like a predatory fish. As the boy in question was somewhat overweight, I pointed out that he ought to shut up because he resembled a beached whale. That left him completely stranded, and I could tell he regretted his little sally. That’s all I remember about my childhood. Almost everything else has been erased and consigned to oblivion. But I always remember the pike episode. I remember the feeling of humiliation, how my cheeks burned and how I was almost blind with rage. I’m not much to look at, I’ve known that for a long time. My eyes are too close together and deep-set, with irises the colour of cod liver oil. Sometimes I skulk in the bushes bordering the path that leads into the park. I just stand there and peer out at the passing pedestrians. Old people with sticks, elderly, lonely men, little girls in short, flaring skirts, tittering and gossiping, dangerous as death caps.

Chapter 6

DR FISCHER, WHO'S in charge of our ward, was once an idealist, or at least I imagine that he was; with a genuine desire to assauge the pain of others. Alleviating discomfort and despair is important to people right at the end of their lives.

Dignified and self-sacrificing, he wanted to move amongst the beds making a difference. Now he has a resigned and round-shouldered look as he mooches from room to room wearing shabby suede shoes and a downcast expression. He has worked at Løkka Nursing Home for more than twenty years, and the people he cares for only have a short time to live. It's as if the mere thought of this takes his breath away. He also possesses a very fastidious conscience. It cries out over the least little thing, as if all the misery in the world were his fault. It's often struck me that one fine day this troublesome conscience will be the death of him, because such things weaken the entire organism. He has a habit of massaging his temple. As if there's something in there that's irritating him, a difficult idea, perhaps, or a painful recollection. Each time he sits down to rest, he raises his hand and begins the massage. His job is strenuous. In my mind's eye I see a thousand hands tugging and tearing at his coat, grabbing at his hair, forcing him up against the wall.

I need help, voices cry, I must have relief, I want more, and right away!

Painkillers, sleeping pills, something that eases fear and anxiety, something that lessens grief and hopelessness. He can't get away. Perhaps he's got problems at home to wrestle with too, for all I know. A wife he no longer loves,

children who have no respect for him. He's trapped in his world, trapped in his white coat, his pricking conscience chasing him up and down the corridors. I sense that Dr Fischer doesn't like me. He's out to get me, I think. He'll catch me, if he has the chance, he's always waiting for an opportunity. I'm very sensitive to such things; it's something to do with energy, or lack of energy. Nothing flows between us, no warmth, no sympathy.

I keep out of his way, for he's a kind of harbinger of things to come.

I've never seen him in the park near Lake Mester.

Ten minutes' walk from the park is the Dixie Café, half hidden amongst a clump of birch trees, with its dark green plastic tables and chairs. Two large palm trees in blue pots stand by the door. They're artificial, of course. Perhaps the owner thinks this is an exotic touch, but there, amongst the birches, they simply look odd. The Dixie has a youthful clientele. They buy burgers and Coke, and loiter by the wall, nudging and jostling each other in a friendly way. I've walked there a couple of times and sat at one of the plastic tables with a styrofoam cup of anaemic coffee, watching the youngsters. They don't inhabit the same world as me. Perhaps it's more that I've been cut adrift from everyone else, as if a cord has been severed. Or the wheels of time have worn it through. I don't really understand my own situation, I don't understand this sense of always being an outsider, of not belonging, of not feeling at home in the day's routines. Forces I can't control have torn me away from other people. I like being on my own, but I want a woman. If only I had a woman!

At this point I might mention that when I was a small boy, I found my father hanging from a rafter one day. His face was engorged and bluish black, and a great, thick tongue stuck out from between his lips. If nothing else, it would help to

explain why I’m the way I am. But it’s not true. My father was a decent man and he never hurt a fly. Distant and detached he certainly was, but he didn’t hang himself from a rafter. He died when I was fourteen, of a massive thrombosis.

I’m sure Dr Fischer is soft on Sister Anna and has his dark and wistful eye on her. Perhaps Sali Singh, who works in the kitchen, has too. I notice such things immediately. There’s a lot of communication between human beings that isn’t expressed in words, and I’m exceedingly observant. Some people don’t understand this, they concentrate on what’s being said, while others, like me, become masters of the hint, the tiny signals that tell. A quick glance at Sali and I know how he’s feeling, even though he may have his back to me. I look at his shoulders, notice if they’re hunched. Is he standing four-square, or tripping about nervously. I take in how the movement of his hands emanates from his squat body, evenly, or in fits and starts, haltingly or fluently. Sali is a big man, most of his weight is round his waist. I wonder what he thinks about Norway and Norwegians, deep down in his dusky, Indian heart. Probably nothing very flattering, we’re so unbearably spoilt. But he makes lovely open sandwiches, standing in his kitchen at Løkka. He’s indifferent to budgets, just loads the bread generously with all manner of good things. How odd that must seem to a man who can hardly be a stranger to poverty. His eyes are almost black. His oily hair takes on a bluish sheen, as he stands there working beneath the fluorescent lighting.