

# SHOULD ANYTHING HAPPEN IN TRONDHEIM

by Kristian Byskov

## Corridor

The corridor is so long that I can hardly make out its end. The lamps on the wall give a warm light, I step forward on the soft carpet. I am moving slowly ahead, almost sailing along the passage. I can feel the seconds pass as I progress. The clock is ticking with the pulse in my chest. The walls are covered with wallpaper featuring a vertical pattern of roses and cats. Along each side are doors. They are each alike, dark red with round brass handles. I am reminded of a hotel, only there are no numbers on the doors. I approach one door, not knowing why this one in particular. My hand reaches out and without any effort it turns the handle and the door opens itself.

## Memory

My father was a robust man. As a child I was mesmerized by his strength and the compactness of his body. As if his muscles were attracted to some centre of gravity inside of him. Upholding this constant tension, my father's movements always looked as though he were struggling with whatever he was doing. I often stared at him in amazement as he was mowing the lawn. The lawnmower was only a prop, its noise only the soundtrack to this fight. When he swam the water was not water but a thousand liquid arms trying to hold him back. He would breathe like a whale. Even when making the bed, he wrestled with the sheets and pillows like some invisible body equal to his strength. They always lay there as evidence of this struggle. These bursts of temperament both frightened and astonished me. I was attracted to this behaviour as well as scared of its force. It seemed to come from that compacted core, deep within the tissue and bones of his body, pulling ever harder, contracting and pressing all matter together. And this constant struggle, this war with the atmosphere, seemed to not only constitute an excess of energy, it seemed to be the very thing pulling the mass of my father's body ever closer to its centre.

## Hospital

"Any symptoms of skin diseases?" The voice squeaks in the entry phone. I have to bend forward to reply: "Excuse me?"

Other patients are arriving. They gather around me. Some of them regard me patiently as I try awkwardly to communicate with the guard. Others stir, possibly worried that a foreigner will screw up their visit to the hospital.

“Skin diseases? Rashes, skin peeling off, sudden irritation?” The guard is now peeking through a crack in the door, shouting at the group. We all look around at each other. Heads are shaking here and there.

“I have,” says a man with a Swedish accent, who’s kept himself at a distance from the rest of us.

“Okay, you stay where you are. The rest can come in,” says the guard holding her arms up to the man. Before entering with the others, I get a closer look at him. It does seem like the skin of his face is starting to peel off. I sink some spit as I enter the lobby, I am the last one, and continue up the large flight of stairs in the hallway. They lead up to a big waiting room with a high ceiling and large windows, almost empty of people except for the group I entered with, whose members have now spread themselves on benches on the left side of the room. To the right are two doors, one small and the other a large double door. Above the small door a green number is blinking, an impatient voice is heard in a loudspeaker: “Number 97.” No one reacts so the turn goes on to 98. I notice the ticket dispenser in the middle of the room, right in front me. The others all have little slips of paper in their hands. Some are clinging to theirs, constantly glancing at the green number above the small door. I take a number and sit down on a bench facing a window, looking at a concrete wall. I can see my own reflection in the glass. The paleness of my face, the deeply set eyes. I look like a racoon. I need sleep. Urgently. I need access to the island.

“Number 99.”

A man raises his head from his hands in a profoundly tired way. He almost stumbles on his way to the little door. He reminds me of my former school teacher. I don’t know why. When my turn comes, I enter the small door, finding that it leads to a very small room. A little, round woman looks at me from behind a pane of glass. After answering some questions, I am led back into the larger room to wait again. Gradually people whose number has already been called are called again, this time by their name. When it is finally my turn, I rush up, go through the double door into a new room, filled with benches like the previous one. I recognize most of the people I arrived with, waiting on the benches in this room. This is not a doctor’s office as I had expected. I gaze at them, disappointedly. I can see that they have endured the same disappointment. They don’t return my gaze, which makes them look somehow complicit in my having to wait again, this time in a new room.

"Take a seat, please," says a woman from behind another glass screen. A nurse, I suspect. They are three nurses in there, looking at computer screens, chatting and noting things down. Without sleep, one becomes slow, disengaged and irritated. It is obvious that the employees in this hospital do not get their fair share of sleep either.

I sit down, regretting that I didn't come here yesterday. But yesterday I went oystering with Cody in Trondheim Fjord.

## Bedroom

In my bed the following night, facing the ceiling for hours on end, I dive into a large catalogue of my memories. I am sleepless for the third night in a row. There isn't much one can do in such a condition, going about without sleep. Memories become increasingly important. They serve as a substitute for the dreams I don't have.

I was warned before entering the city: "One doesn't get much sleep there." That was the modest way one local had of explaining that in Trondheim no one is sleeping, they don't even doze off a little. It is a sleepless city and has been so for quite a while.

"How do people survive?" I asked the local.

"There is an island a bit off the coast," he told me, "we go there to sleep."

A sleep colony.

"Have you heard? There are oysters in Trondheim Fjord!" the Black Box chatters away in the darkness of my bedroom. One can only survive 11 days without sleep. For the majority of this time, one is not functional on many levels. In order to stretch the functional time as much as possible, we have been advised to spend at least 8 hours each night with the lights off in our bedrooms, lying in our beds. Only having the Box to keep me company, I am on the verge of losing my sanity.

"You are not much of a conversation partner," says the Box in a disappointed tone. I push it to the floor. Yesterday I was on the bay in a boat. Cody had stolen the boat and we rowed out to pick oysters. Dived and picked as many as the boat could hold from the bottom of the bay. What a sight down there. Oysters growing as far the cone of the flash light could reach. They probably cover the floor of the bay entirely by now. In some places they have even begun to pile up. Oysters growing on each other, their shells forming small apartment blocks, even whole cities, for their soft bodies.

"No going to the island tomorrow," they told me at the hospital yesterday. My medical examination was fine. But there was simply no way they could get my permit ready for today. Not with all the people waiting to get there. Not with the limited capacity of the island. I would have to wait without knowing for how long.

"You will hear from us," they said.

The sounds of people in pain. The department for skin diseases was right next door. I could hear them while speaking with the doctor. He didn't seem to take any notice though. I could only imagine the people in their beds, linen with rusty red stains, screaming as their skin peeled itself off little by little. All until no skin remained, only the soft intestines and muscle tissue left, still breathing, still alive. Soft, viscous and moaning. I felt the dizziness from my sleep deprivation increase.

"No going to the island tomorrow," the doctor repeated in a friendly tone. As if it gave him some perverse pleasure to disappoint me. He could see I was desperate. I am sure of it. "The system is overrun. You will have to wait. But everything looks fine. You're as healthy as a fish!" he smiled.

"There's no such thing as a healthy fish, and you know it!" I failed to really raise my voice and thus the doctor didn't catch my anger.

"You might be very right about that," he said with a serious expression, "Soon we'll only have oysters in the fjord." Oysters. That room next door. How could he manage to ignore the screams?

The ringing tone in my ears. It began yesterday and now it persists to ring. Along with the dryness in my mouth, the constant headache pressing on my forehead, the symptoms of insomnia are building up, undramatic in my case. Nothing like the fits of hallucination some people get. The amnesia others have. I feel as if I'm going to pieces. A lone tear runs down my cheek. I'm about to give up. I regret that I came here.

"The seagulls are fighting again," the Box says joyfully from the floor somewhere. The seagulls are always fighting, if not with each other then with some other species. I hear them outside my window. I turn over in my bed. I imagine that moment before my body lets go and my consciousness slips away. But it isn't happening. I need to go to that island. I need to sleep. My skin feels tight around my face. Is this how it feels before it begins to peel off? My heart is banging against my ribs. It wants to be released. Out into the open, away from its enclosed chamber. I am about to open my mouth, possibly to say something to myself, don't know what. Then it dawns on me through the haze of another tear: Cody's boat.

## Passage

"How about a nice cup of coffee to help you focus?" the Box chimes as I slam the door to my apartment. I take the elevator down and go out into the early morning light of June. The streets are empty except for the many seagulls. They are fighting over uncollected garbage and, probably, pieces skin left behind by yesterday's pedestrians. I try not to think about it. I'm nauseous enough as it is.

I live close to where we hid the boat two nights ago. Under the deck of the café where Cody works. It lies right on the harbour front, a prime location back in the day. We've known each other since we were kids, Cody and I. We've always trusted each other. Until now at least. I pass a pile of garbage and then a pile of used car batteries. I'm almost falling over my feet. In fact a cup of coffee would be... my thoughts are interrupted as I turn a corner to walk along the harbour.

My stomach turns and my hand covers my mouth instinctively. Act normal, I think to myself through a haze. On the ground a few metres in the direction I'm heading, a group of people are lying flat. Skinless people. Those that have survived the full transformation of the disease. I have never actually seen them. Usually people are only too keen to be isolated, enclosed in hospitals, homes and the like. But not these ones. There are nine of them. Their legs and arms are folded around their bodies. Muscles, mucus, dirt from the ground, and bones poking out here and there. They don't look human any longer. The eight of them have their attention turned to the ninth. Words hiss from a face that seems to float in the middle of the lumpy structure.

"Hereby you will all be baptised anew," the voice is solemnly hissing, "baptised into the new kind of life we are meant to lead."

"Amen!" hisses the choir.

"For we are no longer human! Thus we must dwell with our kind. Go to where we belong! We are pioneers but not foreign to the lands we will enter. We have brothers there, sisters there, building a new civilization for us. A new colony on the bottom of the bay is to come!"

"Amen!"

"These, the shellfish of the deep, are our real kin, our saviours from this dry, dusty land!"

"Amen!"

"We will now re-baptise as the holy spirit provides us with a new chance. Over time we will grow our own beautiful shells. We will live in that promised land, for the one we live in now has become hell to us. We will now seek to fulfil the role that God intended for us."

"Amen! Amen!"

A few hungry seagulls, their wings stirring, observe from a distance as the little group of the reformed set in a snail-like motion towards the edge of the dock. One by one and with some constraint, each body hauls itself over the edge and into the water with a plump splash. Nine splashes and a few hallelujahs and I'm alone again on the harbour front.

### Corridor

From the room I enter a brightly lit corridor. Different from before. All the doors are blue, otherwise featureless. The handles are no longer made of brass but of stainless steel. The floor is of grey concrete. One of the halogen lamps flickers. Along the walls photos of violins hang as decoration. I begin moving forward at a steady pace. This corridor, too, has no windows and is filled with doors on either side. By now I realize that behind each door is a room. The rooms each contain a dream. If I enter a room, I enter into the reality of one of my dreams. Every time I come back into the corridor, I find it changed. The carpet is different, the wall hangings, the lights, the wallpaper, colours, materials and so on. I can almost feel the seconds pass as I move ahead, as if the corridor itself is time. When I look back, I see memories lingering in the corridor. An evening trip to the beach bathed in yellow light and a train journey alone flicker into my vision. An old acquaintance of mine looks up, anxiously, at me. All memories materialising among each other, as if passively waiting for something. They live there now, behind me in the corridor, having nowhere else to go.

### Boat

As I reach the café, I'm relieved to see that no one has yet shown up for work. The boat is still there under the deck. It is a small boat without a motor. So I have to row it. Carefully I drag it to the edge. I look down into the water before I throw the boat in and crawl down the ladder. There's almost no wind and the temperature is pleasant. The tide is low too. Perfect day to go oystering, I think to myself. Then I'm reminded of what I just saw a few minutes ago. I will probably not eat another oyster again.

As I row the boat out into the bay, I look at the skyline of Trondheim. The apartment blocks by the water next to mine that no one got to live in. The cruise ship port, empty.

Only the new hospital seems to buzz with activity. That and the bar district, open 24 hours. I see the city gradually fade into the morning mist and imagine myself on the harbour, staring out to the bay. I feel the longing to go away disappear and become a warm rush in my chest. I am nearing the island. Looking over my shoulder, I see it becoming clearer to my vision. It is a small island, no trees, only bushes and grass, a few low buildings. Nothing special to look at really.

## Memory

My father died of sudden illness. It was before the skin disease. It was hurtful to see this body, previously so vigorous, become weak. As if the centre of gravity inside him had stopped pulling his mass together, letting go of it all. Leaving a hollow space where there before had been so much activity. Apart from grief, I had expected that this would somehow also make me feel more whole. Instead I felt empty. Filled with the same empty space as the implosion of his gravitational centre had left behind.

Anxiety finds me at night and wakes me up in sudden shocks. I have never slept very well since then. Something inside me pulls itself together for an instant only to let go in a sudden spasm. It leaves me wide awake, eyes bloodshot, heart pounding. If there were only a place to find peace, where I would not be able to feel myself. I thought Trondheim would be this place, that not having to sleep would be a relief. But coming here was not the right decision. My father always knew what to do. For him, right and wrong seemed so easy to distinguish. Only after his death did I really start doubting the nature of things around me. My only hope is an island that I have never been to.

## Sea

A seagull passes me by, scouting. Clouds gather over land. I am completely alone, all by myself. I only have my memories.

A side wind is blowing gently in my face. I constantly have to direct the boat back onto its course. It takes concentration not to let it stray. As I close in on the island, I begin to feel increasingly sleepy. My head is nodding, falling on my shoulders. I have to struggle to keep my eyes open. It is the influence of the island or, well, the influence of Trondheim decreasing. Falling asleep is all I have been wishing for, for so long, but I haven't arrived at the island yet. I struggle for what seems to be a very long time. Then I give in. Sleep enters me in that rocking boat, departed and yet to arrive. I sink into a blissful darkness, deep and warm. In a dream the wind takes me out to the open sea. Far, far away.

## Corridor

Walking at an even pace, I still can't make out the end of the corridor. I want to reach it. There are so many doors filling the walls. Each opening on to their own secret world. I open one of them without entering. I open another, still walking along the floor of the corridor. Soon I am opening every door that I pass. So in that corridor of time I keep on moving ahead, and I open all the doors, one after another. And I leave them open. All my dreams spill out into the corridor. As if they have been constrained in their rooms for far too long. They meet in that corridor where no doors are closed. Here they greet each other. I create a party where my memories converse with my dreams, enjoying each other's company. All my relatives dine with characters from stories yet to be told. That time I caught a fish meets that time I was a fish. That time there were any fish to be had at a voluminous buffet bursting with foam tickling like bubbles of champagne until my skin itself begins to foam, shape itself anew, move and touch places where new realities emerge. The carpet is ever-changing and the wall hangings dance in front of my eyes. A firework of interior décor frames this gala. Nothing is stable. Only the fact that at the corridor's end it turns a corner and reveals another corridor, equally long and equally filled with an abundance doors.