Smilla's Sense of Snow

by Peter Høeg

(Translated by Tina Nunnally)

Part One
The City

1

It's freezing-an extraordinary 0° Fahrenheit -and it's snowing, and in the language that is no longer mine, the snow is qanik-big, almost weightless crystals falling in clumps and covering the ground with a layer of pulverized white frost.
December darkness rises up from the grave, seeming as limitless as the sky above us. In this darkness our faces are merely pale, shining orbs, but even so I can sense the disapproval of the pastor and the verger directed at my black net stockings and at Juliane's whimpering, made worse by the fact that she took disulfiram this morning and is now confronting her grief almost sober. They think that she and I have no respect for either the weather or the tragic circumstances. But the truth is that both the stockings and the pills are each in their own way a tribute to the cold and to Isaiah.
The pastor and the verger and the women surrounding Juliane are all Greenlanders, and when we sing "Guutiga, illimi," "Thou, My Lord," and when Juliane's legs buckle under her and she starts to sob, the volume slowly increasing, and when the pastor speaks in West Greenlandic, taking his point of departure in the Moravians' favorite passage from Ephesians about redemption through His blood, then with only a tiny lapse of concentration you might feel yourself transported to Upernavik or Holsteinsborg or Qaanaaq in Greenland.
But out in the darkness, like the bow of a ship, the walls of Vestre Prison loom; we are in Copenhagen.
The Greenlanders' cemetery is part of Vestre Cemetery. A procession follows Isaiah in his coffin Juliane's friends, who are now holding her upright, the pastor and the verger, the mechanic, and a small group of Danes, among whom I recognize only the social worker and the investigator.

The pastor is now saying something that makes me think he must have actually met Isaiah, even though, as far as I know, Juliane has never gone to church.

Then his voice disappears, because now the other women are weeping along with Juliane.

Many have come, perhaps twenty, and now they let their sorrow wash over them like a black flood, into which they dive and let themselves be carried along in a way that no outsider could understand, no one who has not grown up in Greenland. And even that might not be enough. Because I can't follow them, either.

For the first time I look closely at the coffin. It's hexagonal. At a certain point ice crystals take the same form. Now they are lowering him into the ground. The coffin is made of dark wood, it looks so small, and there is already a layer of snow on it. The flakes are the size of tiny feathers, and that's the way snow is; it's not necessarily cold. What is happening at this moment is that the heavens are weeping for Isaiah, and the tears are turning into frosty down that is covering him up. In this way the universe is pulling a comforter over him, so that he will never be cold again.

The moment the pastor throws earth on the coffin and we are supposed to turn around and leave, a silence falls that seems to last for a long time. The women are quiet; no one moves, it's the sort of silence that is waiting for some thing to burst. From where I'm standing, two things happen.

First, Juliane falls to her knees and puts her face to the ground, and the other women leave her alone.

The second event is internal, inside of me, and what bursts through is an insight.

All along I must have had a comprehensive pact with Isaiah not to leave him in the lurch, never, not even now.

□2

We live in the White Palace.

On a piece of donated land the Housing Authority has put up a row of prefabricated white concrete boxes, for which it received an award from the Association for the Beautification of the Capital.

The whole thing, including the prize, makes a cheap and flimsy impression, but there's nothing trivial about the rent, which is so high that the only ones who can afford to live here are people like Juliane, whom the state is supporting; the mechanic, who had to take what he could get; and those living on the edge, like myself.

So the nickname, the White Palace, is something of an insult to those of us who live here, but still basically appropriate.

There are reasons for moving in and reasons for staying here. With time, the water has become important to me. The White Palace is located right on Copenhagen Harbor. This winter I have been able to watch the ice forming.

In November the frost set in. I have respect for the Danish winter. The cold-not what is measured on a thermometer, but what you can actually feel-depends more on the strength of the wind and the relative humidity than on the actual temperature. I have been colder in Denmark than I ever was in Thule in Greenland. When the first clammy rain showers of November slap me in the face with a wet towel, I meet them with fur-lined capucines, black alpaca leggings, a long Scottish skirt, a sweater, and a cape of black Gore-Tex.

Then the temperature starts to drop. At a certain point the surface of the sea reaches 29°F, and the first ice crystals form, a temporary membrane that the wind and waves break up into frazil ice. This is kneaded together into a soapy mash called grease ice and gradually forms free-floating plates, pancake ice, which, on a cold day at noon, on a Sunday, freezes into one solid sheet.

And it gets colder, and I'm happy because I know that now the frost has gained momentum; now the ice will stay, now the crystals have formed bridges and enclosed the salt water in pockets that have a structure like the veins of a tree through which the liquid slowly seeps; not many who look over toward Holmen think about this, but it's one reason for believing that ice and life are related in many ways.

The ice is normally what I look for first when I come up onto Knippels Bridge. But on this December day I see something else. I see a light.

It's yellow, the way most lights are in a city in the winter; and it has been snowing, so even though it's a faint light, it produces a strong reflection. It's shining at the base of one of the warehouses, which in a moment of weakness they decided to let stand when they built our apartment blocks. At the end of the building, toward Strand Street and Christianshavn the blue light of a patrol car is revolving. I can see a police officer. An area temporarily cordoned off with red-and-white tape. Up against the building I can make out what has been blocked off: a small, dark shadow in the snow.

Because I'm running and because it's just barely five o'clock and the evening traffic hasn't tapered off, I get there several minutes ahead of the ambulance.

Isaiah is lying with his legs tucked up under him, with his face in the snow and his hands a'round his head, as if he were shielding himself from the little spotlight shining on him, as if the snow were a window through which he has caught sight of something deep inside the earth.

Surely the police officer ought to ask me who I am and take down my name and address, and in general prepare things for those of his colleagues who will shortly have to start ringing doorbells. But he's a young man with a queasy expression on his face. He avoids looking directly at Isaiah. After assuring himself that I won't step inside his tape, he lets me stand there.

He could have cordoned off a larger area. But it wouldn't have made any difference. The warehouses are in the process of being partially renovated. People and machines have packed down the snow as hard as a terrazzo floor.

Even in death Isaiah seems to have turned his face away, as if he wants no part of anyone's sympathy. High overhead, outside the spotlight, a rooftop is barely discernable. The warehouse is tall, probably just as tall as a seven- or eight-story apartment complex. The adjoining building is under renovation. It has scaffolding along the end facing Strand Street. I head over there as the ambulance works its way across the bridge, and then moves in between the buildings.

The scaffolding covers the wall all the way up to the roof. The last ladder is down. The structure seems shakier the higher you go.

They're in the process of putting on a new roof. Above me loom the triangular rafters, covered with tarpaulins. They stretch for half the length of the building. The

other half of the roof, facing the harbor, is a snow-covered flat surface. That's where Isaiah's tracks are.

At the edge of the snow a man is huddled with his arms around his knees, rocking back and forth.

Even hunched up, the mechanic gives the impression of being big. And even in this position of complete surrender he seems to be holding back.

It's so bright. Some years ago they measured the light at Siorapaluk in Greenland. From December to February, when the sun is gone. People imagine eternal night. But there are stars and the moon, and now and then the northern lights. And the snow. They registered the same amount of lumens as outside a medium-sized provincial town in Denmark. That's how I remember my childhood, too-that we always played outside, and that it was always light. In those days we took the light for granted. A child takes so many things for granted. With time, you start to ask questions.

In any case, it strikes me how bright the roof is in front of me. As if it has always been the snow, in a layer maybe four inches thick, which has created the light on this winter day, and which still shines with a diffuse glitter like brilliant little gray beads.

On the ground the snow melts slightly, even in hard frost, because of the heat of the city. But up here it lies loosely, the way it fell. Only Isaiah has walked on it.

Even when there's no heat, no new snow, no wind, even then the snow changes. As if it were breathing, as if it condenses and rises and sinks and disintegrates.

He wore sneakers, even in winter, and those are his footprints, the worn-down sole of his basketball shoes with the barely visible outline of concentric circles in front of the arch on which the player is supposed to pivot.

He stepped out into the snow from where we're standing. The footprints head diagonally toward the edge and continue along the roof for maybe thirty feet. There they stop. And then continue toward the corner and end of the building. They follow the edge at a distance of about two and a half feet, up to the corner facing the other warehouse. From there he turned approximately nine feet in toward the center to get a running start. Then the tracks go straight for the edge where he jumped off.

The other roof consists of glazed black tiles that come to such a steep angle at the gutter that the snow has slid off. There wasn't anything to hold on to. He might just as well have jumped straight out into thin air:

There are no other footprints besides Isaiah's. No one has been across the surface of the snow except him.

"I found him," says the mechanic.

It will never be easy for me to watch men cry. Maybe because I know how fatal crying is to their selfrespect. Maybe because it's so unusual for them that it always carries them back to their childhood. The mechanic has reached the stage where he has given up wiping his eyes; his face is a mask of mucus.

"Strangers are coming," I say.

The two men who approach along the roof are not happy to see us.

One of them is lugging photographic equipment and is out of breath. The other reminds me a little of an ingrown toenail. Flat and hard and full of impatient irritation. "Who are you?"

"I live upstairs from the boy," I say. "And this gentleman lives on the same floor as he does."

"Would you please leave."

Then he notices the footprints and forgets about us. The photographer takes the first pictures with a flash and a big Polaroid camera.

"Only the deceased's footprints," says the Toenail. He talks as if he were filling out his report in his mind. "The mother is a drunk. So he was playing up here."

He catches sight of us again. "Time to go downstairs."

At that moment I am clear about nothing, only confused. But I have so much confusion to spare that I could give some of it away. So I don't budge.

"Strange way to play, don't you think?" I ask him. Some people might say that I'm vain. And I wouldn't exactly contradict them. I may have my reasons for it. At any rate, my clothes are what makes him listen to me now. The cashmere sweater, the fur hat, the gloves. He certainly would like to send me downstairs. But he can see that I look like an elegant lady. And he doesn't meet very many elegant ladies on the rooftops of Copenhagen. So he hesitates for a moment.

"What do you mean?"

"When you were that age," I say, "and your father and mother hadn't come home from the salt mines yet, and you were playing alone up on the roof of the barracks for the homeless, did you run in a straight line along the edge?"

He chews on that.

"I grew up in Jutland," he says. But he doesn't take his eyes off me as he speaks.

Then he turns to his colleague. "Let's get some lights up here. And would you mind accompanying the lady and the gentleman downstairs."

I feel the same way about solitude as some people feel about the blessing of the church. It's the light of grace for me. I never close my door behind me without the awareness that I am carrying out an act of mercy toward myself. Cantor illustrated the concept of infinity for his students by telling them that there was once a man who had a hotel with an infinite number of rooms, and the hotel was fully occupied. Then one more guest arrived. So the owner moved the guest in room number 1 into room number 2; the guest in room number 2 into number 3; the guest in 3 into room 4, and so on. In that way room number 1 became vacant for the new guest.

What delights me about this story is that everyone involved, the guests and the owner, accept it as perfectly natural to carry out an infinite number of operations so that one guest can have peace and quiet in a room of his own. That is a great tribute to solitude.

I realize, as well, that I have furnished my apartment like a hotel room-without overcoming the impression that the person living here is in transit. Whenever I feel a need to explain it to myself, I think about the fact that my mother's family, and she herself, were more or less nomads. In terms of an excuse it's a weak explanation. But I have two big windows facing the water. I can see Holmens Church and the Marine Insurance building and the National Bank, whose marble faqade is the same color tonight as the ice in the harbor.

I thought that I would grieve. I spoke to the police officers and offered Juliane a shoulder to lean on and took her over to a friend's place and came back, and the whole time I held my grief at bay with my left hand. Now it should be my turn to give in to sorrow.

But it's not yet time. Grief is a gift, something you have to earn. I make myself a cup of peppermint tea and go over to stand by the window. But nothing happens. Maybe because there's still one little thing I have to do, a single thing unfinished, the kind that can block a flood of emotions.

So I drink my tea while the traffic on Knippels Bridge thins out, becoming separate red stripes of light in the night. Gradually a kind of peace comes over me. Finally it's enough that I can fall asleep.

□3

On an August day a year and a half earlier I met Isaiah for the first time. A humid, leaden heat had transformed Copenhagen into an incubator for imminent madness. I came home on a bus with that special pressure-cooker at mosphere, wearing a new dress of white linen, cut low in the back, trimmed with Valencia ruffles that took a long time to steam-press so they'd stand up properly, and they had already wilted in the general depression.

There are those who head south this time of year. South to the heat. Personally, I've never been farther than Køge, thirty miles south of Copenhagen. And don't plan to go either, until the nuclear winter has cooled down the continent.

It's the kind of day that might make you wonder about the meaning of life, and discover that there is none. And there's something rooting around on the stairway, on the landing below my apartment.

When the first large shipments of Greenlanders began arriving in Denmark in the 1930s, one of the first things they wrote home was that Danes are such pigs: they keep dogs in their houses. For a moment I think it's a dog lying on the stairs. Then I see that it's a child, and on this particular day that is not much better.

"Beat it, you little shit," I say.

Isaiah looks up.

"Peerit," he says. Beat it yourself.

There aren't many Danes who can tell by looking at me. They think there's a trace of something Asian, especially when I put a shadow under my cheekbones. But the boy on the stairs looks right at me with a gaze that cuts straight through to what he and I have in common. It's the kind of look you see in newborns. Later it vanishes, sometimes reappearing in extremely old people. This could be one reason I've never burdened my life with children-I've thought too much about why people lose the courage to look each other in the eye.

"Will you read me a story?"

I have a book in my hand. That's what prompted his question.

You might say that he looks like a forest elf. But since he is filthy, dressed only in underpants, and glistening with sweat, you might also say he looks like a seal pup.

"Piss off," I say.

"Don't you like kids?"

"I eat kids."

He steps aside.

"Salluvutit, you're lying," he says as I go past.

At that moment I see two things in him that somehow link us together. I see that he is alone. The way someone in exile will always be. And I see that he is not afraid of solitude.

"What's the book?" he shouts after me. "Euclid's Elements," I say, slamming the door.

It turned out to be Euclid's Elements, after all.

That's the one I take out that very evening when the doorbell rings and he's standing outside, still in his underpants, staring straight at me; and I step aside and he walks into my apartment and into my life, never really to leave it again; then I take Euclid's Elements down from the bookshelf. As if to chase him away. As if to establish from the start that I have no books that would interest a child, that he and I cannot meet over a book, or in any other way. As if to avoid something.

We sit down on the sofa. He sits on the very edge, with both legs crossed, the way kids from Thule used to sit at Inglefield in the summertime, on the edge of the dogsled used as a bed inside the tent.

"A point is that which cannot be divided. A line is a length without breadth."

This book turns out to be the one he never comments on, and the one we keep returning to. Occasionally I try others. One time I borrow the children's book Rasmus Klump on the Ice Cap. In all serenity he listens to the description of the first pictures. Then he points a finger at the toylike bear Rasmus Klump.

"What does that one taste like?" he asks.

"A semicircle is a figure contained within a diameter... and the circumference intersected by the diameter." For me, the reading goes through three phases on that first evening in August.

First there is simply irritation at the whole impractical situation. Then there is the feeling that always comes over me at the mere thought of that book: veneration. The knowledge that it is the foundation, the boundary. That if you work your way backwards, past Lobachevsky and Newton and as far back as you can go, you end up at Euclid.

"On the greater of two given unequal straight lines..."

Then at some point I no longer see what I'm reading. At some point there is only my voice in the living room and the light of the sunset from the South Harbor. And then

my voice isn't even there; it's just me and the boy. At some point I stop. And we simply sit there, gazing straight ahead, as if I were fifteen and he were sixteen, and we have reached "the point of no return." Some time later he gets up very quietly and leaves. I watch the sunset, which lasts three hours at this time of year. As if the sun, on the verge of leaving, had discovered qualities in the world that are now making its departure a reluctant one.

Of course Euclid didn't scare him off. Of course it made no difference what I read. For that matter, I could have read aloud from the telephone book. Or from Lewis and Carrisa's Detection and Classification of Ice. He would have come anyway, to sit with me on the sofa.

During some periods he would come every day. And then a couple of weeks might pass when I would see him only once, and from a distance. But when he did come, it was usually just starting to get dark, when the day was over and Juliane was out cold.

Once in a while I would give him a bath. He didn't like hot water, but it was impossible to get him clean in cold. I would put him in the bathtub and turn on the hand-held shower. He wouldn't complain. Long ago he had learned to put up with adversity. But not for one moment did he take his reproachful eyes off my face.

□4

There have been quite a few boarding schools in my life. I regularly work at suppressing the memory of them, and for long periods of time I succeed. It's only in glimpses that a single memory sometimes manages to work its way into the light. The way the particular feeling of a dormitory does at this moment. At Stenhøj School, near Humlebæk, we slept in dorms. One for girls and one for boys. They opened all the windows at night. And our blankets were too thin.

In the Copenhagen county morgue in the basement of the Institute of Forensic Medicine at the University Hospital, the dead sleep their last, cold sleep in dormitories cooled to just above freezing. Everything is clean, modern, and final. Even in the examination room, which is painted like a living room; they've brought in a couple of floor lamps, and a green plant is trying to keep up its courage.

There's a white sheet over Isaiah. Someone has placed a little bunch of flowers on top of it, as if in an attempt to give the potted plant support. He is completely covered, but from the small body and large head, you can tell it's him. The French cranium measurers ran into serious problems in Greenland. They were working from the theory that there was a linear relation between a person's intelligence and the size of his skull. They discovered that the Greenlanders, whom they regarded as a transitional form of ape, had the largest skulls in the world.

A man in a white lab coat lifts the sheet away from Isaiah's face. He looks so intact, as if he had been carefully drained of all blood and color and then put to bed.

Juliane is standing next to me. She's dressed in black, and she is sober for the second day in a row.

As we walk down the hallway, the white coat goes with us.

"You're a relative?" he suggests. "A sister?"

He's no taller than me, but broad and with a stance like a ram about to butt someone.

"Doctor," he says. He points to the breast pocket of his lab coat and discovers that there is no name tag to identify him. "Damn it to hell."

I continue down the hallway. He's right behind me. "I have children myself," he says. "Do you know whether it was a doctor who found him?"

"A mechanic," I say.

He takes the elevator up with us. I suddenly feel a need to know who has touched Isaiah.

"Did you examine him?"
He doesn't answer. Maybe he didn't hear me. He strides on ahead of us. At the glass door he suddenly whips out a card, the way a flasher tears aside his coat.
"My card. Jean Pierre, like the flute player. Lagermann, like the licorice."

Juliane and I haven't said a word to each other. But as she gets into the taxi and I'm just about to close the door, she grabs hold of my hand.
"That Smilla is a damn great lady," she says, as if she were talking about someone who's not there. "One hundred percent."
The cab drives off, and I straighten up. It's almost noon. I have an appointment.
***
It says "State Autopsy Center for Greenland" on the glass door I come to after I walk back along Frederik V's Street, past the Teilum building and the institute of Forensic Medicine over to the new annex of the University Hospital; I take the elevator up past floors marked on the button panel as the Greenland Medical Association, the Arctic Center, and the Institute for Arctic Medicine, on up to the sixth floor, which is a penthouse suite.
That morning I had called police headquarters and they transferred me to Division A, who put the Toenail on the line.
"You can see him in the morgue," he says. "I also want to talk to the doctor." "Loyen," he says. "You can talk to Loyen."
Beyond the glass door there is a short passageway leading to a sign on which it says PROFESSOR and, in smaller letters, J. LOYEN. Below the sign there is a doorway, and beyond the door a cloakroom, and beyond that a chilly office with two secretaries sitting under photostats of icebergs on blue water in brilliant sunlight, and beyond that the real office begins.
They haven't put in a tennis court here. But not for lack of space. It's probably because Loyen has a couple of them in his back yard in Hellerup, and two more at his summer home on Dune Road in Skagen. And because tennis courts would have ruined the weighty solemnity of the room.
There's a thick carpet on the floor, two walls covered with books, picture windows looking out over the city and Fælled Park, a safe built into the wall, paintings in gold frames, a microscope on a light table, a glass case with a gilded mask that appears to be from an Egyptian sarcophagus, two sofa groups, two monitors on pedestals

that have been turned off, and there's still enough floor space to go for a jog should you get tired of sitting behind a desk.

The desk is a vast mahogany ellipse from which he rises and comes forward to greet me. He is six foot seven and about seventy years old, straight-backed, and tan as a desert sheik in his white lab coat. He has a kind expression on his face, like someone who sits up on a camel benevolently gazing down on the rest of the world crawling past in the sand.

"Loyen."

Even though he omits his title, it's still understood. Along with the fact that we must not forget that the rest of the world's population is at least a head shorter than him, and here, under his feet, he has legions of other doctors who have not succeeded in becoming professors, and above him is only the white ceiling, the blue sky, and Our Lord-and maybe not even that.

"Please sit down, my dear."

He radiates courtesy and dominance, and I ought to be happy. Other women before me have been happy, and there will be many more. What could be better at life's difficult moments than having six feet seven inches of polished medical self-confidence to lean on? And in such reassuring surroundings as these?

On his desk are framed photographs of the doctor's wife and the Airedale and Daddy's three big boys, who are bound to study medicine and get top grades in all their exams, including clinical sexology.

I've never claimed that I was perfect. Confronted with people who have power, and who enjoy using it, I turn into a different person, a baser and meaner one.

But I don't show it. I sit down on the very edge of the chair, and I place my dark gloves and the hat with the dark veil on the very edge of the mahogany surface. Facing Professor Loyen, like so many times before, there is a black-clad, grieving, inquiring, uncertain woman.

"You're a Greenlander?"

It's because of his professional experience that he can see it.

"My mother was from Thule. You were the one who. . . examined Isaiah?"

He gestures affirmatively.

"What I'd like to know is: what did he die of?" The question catches him a little off guard. "From the fall."

"But what does that mean, physiologically?"

He thinks it over for a moment, not used to having to explain the obvious.

"He fell from a height of seven stories. The organism as a whole quite simply collapses."

"But somehow he looked so unscathed."

"That's normal with accidental falls, my dear. But..."

I know what he's going to say: Until we open them up, that is. Then it's nothing but splinters of bone and internal bleeding.

"But he wasn't," he finishes his sentence.

He straightens up. He has other things to do. The conversation is drawing to a close without ever getting started. Like so many conversations before and after this one.

"Was there any trace of violence?"

This doesn't surprise him. At his age and in his business he is not easily surprised.

"None at all," he says.

I sit there in total silence. It's always interesting to leave Europeans in silence. For them it's a vacuum in which the tension grows and converges toward the intolerable.

"What gave you that idea?"

He has now dropped the "my dear." I ignore his question.

"Why is it that this office and this department are not located in Greenland?" I ask.

"The institute is only three years old. Previously there was no autopsy center for Greenland. The district attorney in.Godthab would send word to the Institute of Forensic Medicine in Copenhagen whenever it was necessary. This department is new and temporary. The whole thing is going to be moved to Godthab sometime next year."

"And you?" I ask.

He's not used to being interrogated, and any moment now he's going to stop answering. "I'm head of the Institute for Arctic Medicine. But originally I was a forensic pathologist. During this initial phase I am the acting director of the autopsy center."

"Do you perform all of the forensic autopsies on Greenlanders?"

It's a shot in the dark. But it must have been a hard, flat shot all the same, because it makes him blink:

"No," he says, speaking slowly now, "but I sometimes assist the Danish autopsy center. They have thousands of cases every year, from all over the country."

I think about Jean Pierre Lagermann. "Did you perform the autopsy alone?"

"We have a set routine that is followed except in extraordinary cases. There is one doctor, with a lab technician or sometimes a nurse to assist him."

"Is it possible to see the autopsy report?"
"You wouldn't be able to understand it, anyway. And you wouldn't like what you did understand!"
For a brief moment he has lost his self-control. But it's instantly restored. "These reports are the property of the police, who formally request the autopsies. And who decide, by the way, when the burial can take place after they sign the death certificate. Public access to administrative details applies to civil matters, not criminal ones."
He's into the game and approaching the net. His voice takes on a soothing tone. "You must understand, in a case like this, if there is even the slightest doubt about the circumstances of the accident, both we and the police are interested in the most thorough investigation possible. We look for everything. And we find everything. In a case of molestation it's virtually impossible to avoid leaving marks. There are fingerprints, torn clothing; the child defends himself and gets skin cells under his fingernails. There was nothing like that. Nothing."
So that was the set and match. I get up and put on my gloves. He leans back.
"We looked at the police report, of course," he says. "It was quite clear from the footprints that he was alone on the roof when it happened."
I start the long walk to the middle of the room, and from there I look back at him. I'm on to something but I don't know what it is. But now he's back up on his camel. "You're welcome to phone again, my dear."
It takes a moment before the dizziness subsides.
"We all have our phobias," I say. "Something that we're truly terrified of. I have mine. You probably have yours, when you take off that bulletproof white coat. Do you know what Isaiah's was? It was heights. He would race up to the second floor. But from there he crawled, with his eyes closed and both hands on the banister. Picture that-every day, on the stairway, inside the building, with sweat on his forehead and his knees buckling, five minutes to get from the second to the fourth floor. His mother had tried to get a ground-floor apartment before they moved in. But you know how it is-when you're a Greenlander and on welfare . . ."
There's a good long pause before he replies. "Nevertheless, he was up there."
"Yes," I say, "he was. But you could have tried a hydraulic lift. You could have tried a Hercules crane and you still wouldn't have budged him even a foot up that scaffolding. What puzzles me, what keeps me awake at night, is wondering what made him go up there at all."

I can still see Isaiah's tiny figure before me, lying down there in the basement morgue. I don't even look at Loyen. I simply walk out the door.

□5

Juliane Christiansen, Isaiah's mother, is a strong endorsement for the curative powers of alcohol. When she's sober, she is stiff, silent, and inhibited. When she's drunk, she is lively and happy as a clam.

Because she took the disulfiram this morning and has been drinking on top of the pills, so to speak, since she returned from the hospital this beautiful transformation naturally appears through a veil of the overall poisoning of the organism. And yet she is feeling markedly better. "Smilla," she says, "I love you."

They say that people drink a lot in Greenland. That is a totally absurd understatement. People drink a colossal amount. That's why my relationship to alcohol is the way it is. Whenever I feel the urge for something stronger than herbal tea, I always remember what went on before the voluntary liquor rationing in Thule.

I've been in Juliane's apartment before, but we always sat in the kitchen and drank coffee. You have to respect people's privacy. Especially when their lives are otherwise exposed like an open wound. But now I feel driven by an urgent sense of responsibility; someone has overlooked something.

So I rummage around, and Juliane lets me do as I please. Partly because she bought some apple wine at the supermarket, partly because she's been on welfare and under the electron microscope of the authorities for so long that she has stopped imagining that anything could be kept private.

The apartment is full of that domestic coziness that comes from walking too often across polished hardwood floors with wooden-soled boots, and from forgetting burning cigarettes on the tabletop, and from sleeping off plenty of hangovers on the sofa; the only thing that's new and works properly is the TV, which is big and black, like a grand piano.

There is one more room than in my apartment: Isaiah's room. A bed, a low table, and a wardrobe. On the floor a cardboard box. On the table two sticks, a hopscotch marker, a kind of suction cup, a model car. Colorless as beach pebbles in a drawer.

In the wardrobe a raincoat, rubber boots, clogs, sweaters, undershirts, socks, all stuffed in every which way. I run my fingers through the piles of clothes and over the top of the wardrobe. There is nothing but the dust that fell last year.

On the bed are his things from the hospital in a clear plastic bag. Rain pants, sneakers, sweatshirt, underwear, and socks. From his pocket a soft white stone that he used for chalk.

Juliane is standing in the doorway, crying. "The diapers were the only thing I threw out."

Once a month, when his fear of heights grew worse, Isaiah would wear diapers for a couple of days. One time I bought them for him myself.

"Where's his knife?" She doesn't know.

On the windowsill there is a model ship, like an expensive shout into the soft-spokenness of the room. On the pedestal it says: "S.S. Johannes Thomsen of the Cryolite Corporation of Denmark."

I have never before attempted to pry into how she keeps her head above water.

I put my arm around her shoulders.

"Juliane," I say, "would you please show me your papers?"

The rest of us have a drawer, a notebook, a file folder. Juliane has seven greasy envelopes for the safekeeping of the printed testimony of her existence. For many Greenlanders, the most difficult thing about Denmark is the paperwork. The state bureaucracy's front line of paper: application forms, documents, and official correspondence with the proper public authorities. There is a certain elegant and delicate irony in the fact that even a practically illiterate life like Juliane's has sloughed off this mountain of paper.

The little appointment slips from the alcoholism clinic on Sundholm, her birth certificate, fifty coupons from the bakery on Christianshavns Square (when they add up to 500 kroner you get a free pastry). Old tax deduction cards, statements from Bikuben Savings & Loan, and a card from Rudolph Bergh, a clinic for sexually transmitted diseases. A photograph of Juliane in the King's Garden in the sunshine. Public Health insurance certificates, a passport, receipts from the electric company. Letters from Riber Credit Bureau. A bundle of thin slips of paper, like check stubs, from which it's apparent that Juliane receives a pension of 9,400 kroner a month. At the bottom of the stack there is a bunch of letters. I have never been able to read people's letters, so I skip the private ones. The ones at the bottom are official, typewritten. I'm about to put them all away when I see it.

A peculiar letter. "We hereby wish to inform you that the directors of the Cryolite Corporation of Denmark, at their most recent meeting, have decided to grant you a

widow's pension following the death of Norsaq Christiansen. The monthly pension awarded to you is in the amount of 9,000 kroner, to be adjusted according to the current cost-of-living index." The letter is signed, on behalf of the board of directors, by "E. Lübing, Chief Accountant."

There's nothing very odd about that. But after the letter was typed up, someone turned it 90 degrees. And with a fountain pen that person wrote diagonally in the margin: "I am so sorry. Elsa Lübing."

You can learn something about your fellow human beings from what they write in the margin. People have speculated a great deal about Fermat's vanished proof. In a book concerning the never-proven postulate that whereas it is frequently possible to divide the square of a number into the sum of two other squares, this is not possible with powers higher than two, Fermat wrote in the margin: "I've discovered a truly wonderful proof for this argument. Unfortunately, this margin is too narrow to contain it."

Two years ago some woman sat in the office of the Cryolite Corporation of Denmark and dictated this utterly proper letter. It adheres to all formalities, it has no typing mistakes, it is as it should be. Then she received it for approval and read it over and signed it. She sat there for a moment. And then she turned the paper around and wrote, "I am so sorry."

"What did he die of?"

"Norsaq? He was on an expedition to the west coast of Greenland. There was an accident."

"What kind of accident?"

"He ate something that made him sick. I think."

She gazes at me helplessly. People die. You won't get anywhere by wondering how or why.

"We consider the case closed."

I have the Toenail on the phone. I've left Juliane to her own thoughts, which are now moving like plankton in a sea of sweet wine. Maybe I should have stayed with her. But I'm no angel of mercy. I can hardly take care of my own soul. And besides, I have my own hangups. That's what made me call police headquarters. They connect me with Division A, and they tell me that the detective is still in his office. Judging by his voice, he's been there far too long.

"The death certificate. was signed today at four o'clock."

"What about the footprints?" I ask.
"If you'd seen what I've seen, or if you had children of your own, you'd know how completely irresponsible and unpredictable they are."
His voice shifts into a growl at the thought of all the grief his own brats have caused him.
"Of course, it's only a matter of a shitty Greenlander," I say.
There's silence in the receiver. He is a man who, even after a long workday, has reserves for adjusting his thermostat to quick frost.
"Now I'm damned well going to tell you one thing. We do not discriminate. Whether it's a pygmy that fell, or a serial killer and sex offender, we go all the way. All the way. Do you understand? I picked up the forensics report myself. There is no indication that this was anything but an accident. It's tragic, but we have 175 of them a year."
"I'm thinking of filing a complaint."
"By all means, file a complaint."
Then we hang up. In reality, I hadn't thought about complaining. But I've had a hard day, too.
I realize the police have a lot to do. I understand him quite well. I understood everything he said.
Except for one thing. When I gave my statement the day before yesterday, I answered a lot of questions. But some of them I didn't answer. One of them had to do with "marital status."
"That's none of your business," I told the officer. "Unless you're interested in a date."
Why would the police know anything about my private life? I ask myself: How did the Toenail know that I don't have any children? I can't answer that question.
It's just a little question. But the world is always so busy wondering why a single, defenseless woman, if she's in my age group, doesn't have a husband and a couple of charming little toddlers. Over time you develop an allergic reaction to the question.
I get out a few sheets of unlined paper and an envelope and sit down at the kitchen table. At the top I write: "Copenhagen, December 19, 1993. To the Attorney General. My name is Smilla Jaspersen, and with this letter I would like to file a complaint."

6

He looks as if he's in his late forties, but he's twenty years older. He's wearing a black thermal jogging suit, cleated shoes, an American baseball cap, and fingerless leather gloves. He takes a little brown medicine bottle out of his breast pocket and empties it into his mouth with a practiced, almost discreet movement. It's propranolol, a beta blocker that slows his heartbeat. He opens one of his hands and looks at it. It's big and white and manicured and quite steady. He selects a number-one club, a driver, Taylormade, with a polished bell-shaped head of Brazilian rosewood. He places it beside the ball, then takes his backswing. When he strikes, he has all of his strength, all of his 190 pounds, focused on a point as big as a postage stamp, and the little yellow ball seems to dissolve and vanish. It comes into view again only when it lands on the green, all the way at the edge of the yard, where it obediently drops close to the flag.

"Cayman balls," he says. "From McGregor. I always had trouble with the neighbors before. These only go half as far."

He is my father. This show has been for my benefit, and I see right through it to what it really is. A little boy's plea for love. Which I have absolutely no intention of giving him.

Seen from my perspective, Denmark's entire population is middle-class. The truly poor and the truly rich are so few as to be almost exotic.

I have been fortunate enough to know quite a few of the poor, since many of them are Greenlanders.

My father belongs to the truly wealthy.

He has a 67-foot Swan at Rungsted Marina with a fulltime three-man crew. He has his own little island at the mouth of Ise Fjord where he can retreat to his Norwegian log cabin, and he can tell any uninvited tourists to beat it, fuck off. He is one of the few people in Denmark to own a Bugatti and have a man employed to polish it and warm up the grease in the axle box with a Bunsen burner on the two occasions a year when he puts in an appearance at the Bugatti Club vintage-car race. The rest of the time he makes do with playing the phonograph record sent out by the club, on which you can hear someone cranking up one of these wonderful vehicles, fine-tuning the choke, and giving it the gas.

He owns this house, white as snow and decorated with white-washed cement seashells, with a roof of natural shale and with a winding stairway up to the entrance. With rosebeds in a front yard that drops steeply down to Strand Drive, and a back yard that's big enough for a nine-hole practice course, which is just right, now that he's gotten the new balls.

He earned his money giving injections.

He has never been one to leak information about himself, but whoever is interested can look him up in Who's Who and discover that he became a chief of staff when he was thirty, that he held Denmark's first chair in anesthesiology when it was established, and that five years later he left the hospital system to devote himself-as it's so nicely put-to private practice. Later his fame took him out traveling. Not as a vagabond, but in private jets. He has given injections to the famous. He was in charge of the anesthesia at the first pioneering heart transplants in South Africa. He was with the American delegation of doctors in the Soviet Union when Brezhnev died. I've heard it said that my father was the one who delayed death during the last weeks of Brezhnev's life, wielding his long syringes.

He resembles a longshoreman and discreetly cultivates this look by letting his beard grow out now and then. A beard that is now gray but which was once blue-black and still requires two shaves a day with a straight razor for him to look presentable.

His hands are unfailingly steady. With those hands he can push a 150-mm syringe through the flank, retroperitoneally, through the deep back muscles, into the aorta. Then he taps the tip of the needle lightly against the large artery, to be sure that he has gone far enough, and then goes behind it to leave a deposit of lidocaine up at the large nerve plexus. The central nervous system controls the tone of the arteries. He has a theory that by using this blockade, he can help the poor circulation in the legs of overweight wealthy people.

While he's giving an injection he is as focused as any human being could be. He thinks of nothing else, not even the bill for ten thousand kroner that his secretary is typing up, and which will fall due before the first of January. Merry Christmas and Happy New Year-next, please.

During the past twenty-five years he has been among the two hundred golf players fighting for the last fifty Eurocards. He lives with a ballet dancer who is thirteen years younger than me and who walks around looking at him as if the only thing she lives for is the hope that he will strip the tulle tutu and toe shoes off her.

So my father is a man who possesses everything he can get his hands on. And that's what he thinks he's showing me here on the golf course. That he has everything his heart could desire. Even the beta-blockers, which he's been taking for the past ten years to steady his hands, are largely without side effects.

We walk around the house, along the raked gravel paths; in the summer Sorensen, the gardener, takes a pair of shears to the edges, so you could cut your feet on them if you don't watch out. I'm wearing a sealskin coat over a jumpsuit of embroidered wool with a zipper. Seen from a distance, we are a father and daughter with a plethora of wealth and vitality. On closer examination, we are simply a banal tragedy spread over two generations.

The living room has a floor of bog oak and borders of stainless steel around a wall of glass facing the birdbath and rosebushes and the drop in social status toward Strand Drive. Benja is standing at the fireplace wearing a leotard and woolen socks, stretching the muscles in her feet and ignoring me. She looks pale and lovely and naughty, like an elf maiden turned stripper.

"Brentan," I say.

"I beg your pardon?"

She enunciates every syllable, the way she learned at the Royal Theater school.

"For bad feet, dear. Brentan for fungus between your toes. You can get it without a prescription now."

"It's not fungus," she says coldly. "I don't think people get that until they reach your age."

"Juveniles do too, dear. Especially people who work out a lot. And it spreads to the crotch quite easily."

Snarling, Benja retreats backward into the adjoining chambers. She has an abundance of raw energy, but she had a protected childhood and a skyrocketing career. She hasn't yet experienced the adversity necessary to develop a psyche that can keep fighting back.

Senora Gonzales arranges the tea things on the coffee table, which is a three-inch-thick glass plate on top of a polished marble block.

"It's been a long time, Smilla."

He talks about his new paintings for a while, about the memoirs he's writing, and about what he's practicing on the piano. He's stalling. Preparing himself for the impact from the blow that will come when I state my business, which has nothing to

do with him. He's grateful that I let him talk. But in reality neither of us has any illusions. "Tell me about Johannes Loyen," I say.

My father was in his early thirties when he came to Greenland and met my mother.

The Inuit Aisivak told Knud Rasmussen that in the beginning the world was inhabited only by two men, who were both great sorcerers. Since they wanted to multiply, one of them transformed his body in such a way that he could give birth; and then the two of them created many children.

In the 1860s the Greenland catechist Hanseeraq recorded in the diary of the Brethren Congregation, Diarium Friedrichstal, many examples of women who hunted as men did. There are examples in Rink's collection of legends, and in Reports from Greenland. It has certainly never been commonplace, but it has happened. Caused by the excessive number of women, by death and necessity, and by the natural acceptance in Greenland that each of the sexes contains the potential to become its opposite.

As a rule, however, women have then had to dress like men, and they have had to renounce any sort of family life. The collective could tolerate a change in sex, but not a fluid transition state.

It was different with my mother. She laughed and gave birth to her children and gossiped about her friends and cleaned skins like a woman. But she shot and paddled a kayak and dragged meat home like a man.

When she was about twelve years old, she went out on the ice with her father in April, and there he shot at an uuttoq, a seal sunning itself on the ice. He missed. For other men there might be various reasons why they would miss. For my grandfather there was only one. Something irreversible was about to happen. Calcification of the optic nerve. A year later he was totally blind. On that day in April my mother stayed behind while her father walked on to check a long line. There she had time to ponder the various possibilities for her future. Such as the welfare assistance which even today is below subsistence level in Greenland and at that time was a kind of unintentional joke. Or death by starvation, which was not uncommon, or a life of depending on kinfolk who didn't even have enough for themselves.

When the seal popped up again, she shot it.

Before, she had jigged for sea scorpions and Greenland halibut, and hunted for grouse. With this seal she became a hunter.

I think it was rare for her to step outside herself and take an objective look at her role. But it happened once when we were living in tents at the summer encampment

near Atikerluk, a mountain that is invaded by auks in the summertime, by so many black, white-breasted birds that only someone who has seen it can fully grasp the vast numbers. They defy measurement.

We had come from the north, where we were fishing for narwhals from small, diesel-powered cutters. One day we caught eight animals. Partly because the ice had trapped them in a restricted area, partly because the three boats lost contact with each other. Eight narwhals are far too much meat, even for dog food. Far too much meat.

One of them was a pregnant female. The nipple is located right above the genital opening. When my mother opened the abdominal cavity with a single cut to remove the intestines, an angel-white, perfectly formed pup two and a half feet long slid out onto the ice.

For close to four hours the hunters stood around in virtual silence, gazing out at the midnight sun, which at that time of year brings perpetual light, and ate mattak, narwhal skin. I couldn't eat a single bite.

One week later we are camping out near the bird mountain, and we haven't eaten for twenty-four hours. The technique is to melt into the landscape, waiting, and take the bird with a large net. On the second try I get three.

They were females, on their way to their young. They nest on ledges on the steep slopes, where the young make an infernal racket. The mothers hide the worms they find in a kind of pouch in their beaks. You kill them by pressing on their heart. I had three birds.

There had been so many before these. So many birds killed, cooked in clay, and eaten; so many that I couldn't remember them all. And yet I suddenly see their eyes as tunnels, at the end of which their young are waiting, and the babies' eyes are in turn tunnels, at the end of which is the narwhal pup, whose gaze in turn leads inward and away. Ever so slowly I turn over the net, and with a great explosion of sound, the birds rise into the air.

My mother is sitting next to me, quite still. And she looks at me as if seeing something for the first time.

I don't know what it was that stopped me. Compassion is not a virtue in the Arctic. It amounts to a kind of insensitivity: a lack of feeling for the animals, the environment, and the nature of necessity.

"Smilla," she says, "I have carried you in amaat." It's the month of May, and her skin has a deep brown sheen, like a dozen layers of varnish. She is wearing gold earrings

and a chain with two crosses and an anchor around her neck. Her hair is pulled into a bun at the nape of her neck, and she is big and beautiful. Even now, when I think of her, she is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.

I must have been around five years old. I don't know exactly what she means, but this is the first time I understand that we are of the same sex.

"And yet," she says, "I am as strong as a man."

She has on a red-and-black-checked cotton shirt. Now she rolls up one sleeve and shows me her lower arm, which is as broad and hard as a paddle. Then she slowly unbuttons her shirt. "Come, Smilla," she says quietly. She never kisses me, and she seldom touches me. But at moments of great intimacy, she lets me drink from the milk that is always there, beneath her skin, just as her blood is. She spreads her legs so I can come between them. Like the other hunters, she wears pants made of bearskin given only a rudimentary tanning. She loves ashes, sometimes eating them straight from the fire, and she has smeared some underneath her eyes. In this aroma of burned coal and bearskin, I go to her breast, which is brilliantly white, with a big, delicate rose aureole. There I drink inimuk, my mother's milk.

Later she once tried to explain to me why one month there are 3,000 narwhals gathered in a single fjord seething with life. The next month the ice traps them and they freeze to death. Why there are so many auks in May and June that they color the cliffs black. The next month half a million birds are dead of starvation. In her own way she wanted to point out that behind the life of the Arctic animals there has always been this extreme fluctuation in population. And that in these fluctuations, the number we take means less than nothing.

I understood her, understood every word. Then and later on. But that didn't change a thing. The year after-the year before she disappeared-I began to feel nauseated when I went fishing. I was then about six years old. Not old enough to speculate about the reason. But old enough to understand that it was a feeling of alienation toward nature. That some part of it was no longer accessible to me in the natural way that it had been before. Perhaps I had even then begun to want to understand the ice. To want to understand is an attempt to recapture something we have lost.

"Professor Loyen . . ."

My father pronounces the name with the interest and armed respect with which one brontosaurus has always regarded another. "A very talented man."

The white palm of his hand moves over his cheek and chin. It's a carefully studied gesture which makes a sound like the rasp of a coarse file on a piece of driftwood. "The Institute for Arctic Medicine-he created it."

"What's his interest in forensic medicine? He's let himself be appointed pathologist for Greenland."

"He was originally a forensic pathologist. But he accepts anything that brings merit. He must think it's a good career move."

"What drives him?"

There is a pause. My father has moved through most of his life with his head under his arm. In old age he has become acutely interested in people's motives.

"In my generation there are three kinds of doctors. There are those who get stuck as assistant hospital physicians or end up in private practice. There are many fine people among them. Then there are those who finish writing their dissertation, which is-as you know, Smilla-the arbitrary and ludicrous and inadequate prerequisite for upward mobility in the system. They end up as chiefs of staff. They are minor monarchs in the local society of medicine. Then there are the third kind. Those of us who rose up and have come out on top."

This is said without any hint of self-irony. You could get my father to state, in all seriousness, that one of his problems is that he isn't half as pleased with himself as he has every reason to be.

"To take those last swimming strokes demands a particular strength. A strong desire or ambition. For money. Or power. Or perhaps insight. In the history of medicine this struggle has always been symbolized by fire. The eternal flame of the alchemist beneath the retort."

He gazes straight ahead, as if he had a syringe in his hand, as if the needle were about to reach its goal. "Loyen," he says, "from the time of his school days, has wanted only one thing. Next to that, everything else is trivial. He has wanted to be recognized as the best in his field. Not the best in Denmark, among all the peasants. The best in the universe. His professional ambition is the perpetual flame inside him. And it's not a gas jet. It's a Midsummer bonfire."

I don't know how my mother and father met. I do know that he came to Greenland because this hospitable land has always been the site of scientific experiments. He was in the process of developing a new technique for the treatment of trigeminal neuralgia, an inflammation of the facial sensory nerve. Previously, this condition was assuaged by killing the nerve with injections of alcohol, which led to partial facial

paralysis and loss of sensation on one side of the musculature of the mouth, the so-called drooping lip. This can afflict even the best and richest of families, which is why my father had become interested in it. There were many incidences of that illness in North Greenland. He had come to treat them with his new technique-a partial heat-denaturing of the affected nerve.

There are photographs of him. Wearing his Kastinger boots and his down clothing, with ice ax and glacier goggles, in front of the house they put at his disposal on the American base. With his hands on the shoulders of the two short, dark men who are to interpret for him.

For him, North Greenland was truly the outermost Thule. Not for a minute did he imagine that he would stay more than the one required month in a windblown ice desert, where there wasn't even a golf course.

You might have some clue to the white-hot energy between him and my mother if you consider the fact that he stayed there four years. He tried to get her to move onto the base, but she refused. For my mother, just like everyone born in North Greenland, any suggestion of being cooped up was intolerable. Instead, he followed her out to one of the barracks made of plywood and corrugated tin that were put up when the Americans drove the Inuits out of the area where the base was built. Even today I still ask myself how he managed it. The answer, of course, is that as long as she was alive, he would have left his golf bag and clubs behind at a moment's notice to follow her, even right into the searing center of black hell.

"They had a child," people say. In this case that wouldn't be correct. I would say that my mother had my little brother and me. Outside of this scenario was my father, present without being able to take any real part, dangerous as a polar bear, imprisoned in a land that he hated by a love that he did not understand and that held him captive, over which he seemed to have not even the slightest influence. The man with the syringes and the steady hands, the golf player Moritz Jaspersen.

When I was three years old, he left. Or rather; his own character drove him away. Deep within every blind, absolute love grows a hatred toward the beloved, who now holds the only existing key to happiness. I was, as I said, only three years old, but I remember how he left. He left in a state of seething, pent-up, livid, profane rage. As a form of energy this was surpassed only by the longing that flung him back again. He was stuck to my mother with a rubber band that was invisible to the rest of the world but which had the effect and physical reality of a drive belt.

He didn't have much to do with us children when he was there. From my first six years I remember only traces of him. The smell of the Latakia tobacco he smoked. The autoclave in which he sterilized his instruments. The interest he aroused whenever he would occasionally put on his cleats, take up a stance, and shoot a bucket of balls across the new ice. And the mood he brought with him, which was the sum of the feelings he had for my mother. The same kind of soothing warmth that you might expect to find in a nuclear reactor.

What was my mother's role in this? I don't know, and I will never find out. Those who understand such things say that the two spouses must always assist each other if a relationship is truly to founder and turn to flotsam. That's possible: Like everybody else, from the age of seven I have painted my childhood with lots of false colors, and some of this may have rubbed off on my mother as well. But in any case, she was the one who stayed where she was, and set out her nets and braided my hair. She was there, a huge presence, while Moritz with his golf clubs and beard stubble and syringes oscillated between the two extremes of his love: either a total merging or putting the entire North Atlantic between him and his beloved.

No one who falls into the water in Greenland comes up again. The sea is less than 39°F, and at that temperature all the processes of decomposition stop. That's why fermentation of the stomach contents does not occur here; in Denmark, however, it gives suicides renewed buoyancy and brings them to the surface, to wash up on shore.

But they found the remains of her kayak, which led them to conclude that it must have been a walrus. Walruses are unpredictable. They can be hypersensitive and shy. But if they come a little farther south, and if it's autumn, when there are few fish, they can be transformed into some of the swiftest and most meticulous killers in the great ocean. With their two tusks they can stave in the side of a ship made of ferrocement. I once saw hunters holding a cod up to a walrus that they had captured alive. The walrus puckered up his lips as for a kiss and then sucked the meat right off the bones of the fish.

"It would be nice if you came out here for Christmas, Smilla."

"Christmas doesn't mean anything to me."

"Are you planning to let your father sit here all alone?" This is one of the annoying tendencies that Moritz has developed with age-this mixture of perfidy and sentimentality.

"Couldn't you try the Old Men's Home?"

I have stood up, and now he comes over to me. "You're damned heartless, Smilla. And that's why you've never been able to hold on to a man."

He's as close to tears as he can get. "Father," I say, "write me a prescription."

He switches immediately, fast as lightning, from complaint to concern, just as he did with my mother.

"Are you ill, Smilla?"

"Very. But with this piece of paper you can save my life and keep your Hippocratic oath. It has to be five figures." He winces; it's a matter of his life's blood. We're talking about his vital organs: his wallet and his checkbook. I put on my fur. Benja does not come out to say goodbye. At the door he hands me the check. He knows that this pipeline is his only connection to my life. Even this he is afraid of losing.

"Don't you want Fernando to drive you home?" Then something dawns on him. "Smilla," he shouts, "you're not going away, are you?"

There is a snow-covered lawn between us. It might just as well have been the ice cap.

"There's something weighing on my conscience," I say. "It'll take money to do something about it."

"In that case," he says, half to himself, "I'm afraid that check isn't nearly enough."

In this way he has the last word. You can't win every time.