

# SISTER

KJELL OLA DAHL

Translated by Don Bartlett



**ORENDA  
BOOKS**

Orenda Books  
16 Carson Road  
West Dulwich  
London SE21 8HU  
[www.orendabooks.co.uk](http://www.orendabooks.co.uk)

First published in the United Kingdom by Orenda Books, 2020

First published in Norwegian as *Søsteren* by Gyldendal, 2018

Copyright © Kjell Ola Dahl, 2018

English translation copyright © Don Bartlett, 2020

Kjell Ola Dahl has asserted his moral right to be identified as the author of this work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

All Rights Reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means without the written permission of the publishers.

*This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

This book has been translated with financial support from NORLA



ISBN 978-1-913193-02-7

eISBN 978-1-913193-03-4

Typeset in Garamond by [www.typesetter.org.uk](http://www.typesetter.org.uk)

Printed and bound by 4edge Ltd, Essex

For sales and distribution, please contact [info@orendabooks.co.uk](mailto:info@orendabooks.co.uk)  
or visit [www.orendabooks.co.uk](http://www.orendabooks.co.uk).

**SISTER**



## PART 1

### 1

A number was nailed to the corner of the house wall. He slowed down, leaned forward and glanced to the side and up as he drove past. There was no light in the windows or any other sign of life. He carried on. Rounded first one bend, then another. A place to turn came into sight. A tractor trail leading into the woods. Frank Frølich braked, reversed into it a few metres, pulled out and drove back, past the house again. This time he noticed the gable of another building behind the main house. He continued for a short distance, still unsure how he should go about this, and came level with a wider turning area beside the remains of a brick construction. It looked like a disused petrol station. He pulled off the road and stopped. Made up his mind. Did a U-turn and drove back. Came to a halt by the bus stop near the drive of what appeared to be an abandoned smallholding. He switched off the ignition. Opened the door and got out. There was complete silence. No traffic. A line of trees along the road screened the property. Through the trees, he could see no neighbouring houses. The deserted house stood about twenty metres from the road, in front of a dilapidated outbuilding. He strolled up the narrow drive. The house was chalet style, with one and a half floors, old and run-down. The white paint was flaking off and there were green stains down the wood panelling. Two upper-floor windows were boarded up. The original front door had been replaced with a newer type. The posts supporting the porch roof were rotten at the bottom, where they rested on a concrete plinth. No name-plate on the door, but the number on the house wall didn't lie.

He couldn't see a doorbell anywhere. But a sheep bell hung from a blue nylon cord beside the door.

He rang it.

No response.

He rang the bell again. Pressed his fingers against the door. Locked.

He turned away from the front door and stared at the tumble-down outbuilding. It looked as though a gigantic thumb had pushed the roof down in the middle. One end-wall was bulging under the pressure. Presumably the stanchions had started to give way. Tiles had fallen off. Some of the gaps in the roof had been repaired with corrugated-iron sheets. An optimist had attached a ratchet strap between a post in the entrance and a telephone mast. Probably as a kind of preventative measure against the increasing tilt on one side. An opening in the longer wall was covered with a green tarpaulin. It hung like a huge curtain, with a plank nailed fast lengthwise under the eaves.

He crossed the yard, lifted a corner of the tarpaulin and pulled it aside. The opening was revealed; it was dark inside. He stepped in. The tarpaulin fell back. He stood waiting for his eyes to become accustomed to the dim light. There were stacks of beer crates and several cardboard boxes. He had found what he was looking for: beer and cigarettes. He took some photographs with his mobile phone. The pictures would probably be evidence enough for his employer – a food wholesaler. The works manager suspected the driver who lived here of siphoning off goods. This stock suggested she was right.

He crouched down under the tarpaulin again, ambled back to the car, got in and drove towards Moss to find the motorway back to Oslo. This job had been easier than he had imagined. Quick, not much effort involved. All he had to do now was write a report and attach the photographs.

By the slip road onto the motorway there was a shopping centre. He followed an impulse, braked, headed down to the centre and found a place to park. For ages he had been planning to swim a couple of times a week. But to do that he needed a swimming costume, and now he had the time to buy one.

The broad glass doors slid open. It was early in the day. Not many customers. He walked down the main avenue with shops on both sides. Passed a café. Green eyes behind heavy eyelids checked him over as he walked past. She was in her thirties and wore her red hair in a bob, like a helmet.

It turned out to be too early in the year for swimwear. The assistant in the sports shop tried to sell him some running tights instead. Frølich politely declined.

He walked back the same way and made eye contact with the woman in the café from a distance. She started tidying up behind the counter, so as to appear busier than she actually was, he imagined. A thought struck him. People usually say, when planning a holiday in a big town: if you are choosing somewhere to eat you should go for a place where there are already lots of customers. No one was sitting in this café.

She had finely drawn lips and a hint of a cleft chin. A young Catherine Deneuve maybe. The top of a tattoo licked at her neck.

He stood at the counter and asked what the menu of the day was. She recommended a tapas salad, which she could make up using whatever ingredients she had at her disposal in the kitchen. She assured him that she was good and smiled self-ironically, revealing shiny white teeth in a broad mouth, which made him want to see the smile again. He said: 'I'll try that then.' Immediately she left to make the salad. There was a languorous sensuality about her body. She moved from the counter to a fridge and back again, rhythmically, lissomly, as though dancing. Since there was no one else in the café he saw no reason not to start a conversation. He told her that in fact he had come to buy a swimming costume, but the sports shop didn't have its summer stock in yet; did she know anywhere else that sold swimwear?

She looked up with Mona Lisa eyes and almost imperceptibly shook her head. After another sashay she told him she was a naturist, and with that she channelled the conversation into an intimate zone, one where he felt unsure of himself; he wondered whether she was trying to kill off the conversation. But after serving a salad consisting of cherry tomatoes, cos lettuce, salami, roasted pine kernels and slices of parmesan with freshly baked bread, she came over to his table and asked if everything was alright. He said, as was indeed the truth, that it was the best meal he had eaten for a long time. She asked him where he was from. He answered, and

gradually they moved on to more personal topics, with the result that, as he was driving to Oslo, she was on his mind and he caught himself coming up with new questions he would have liked to ask her. The conversation had rattled along with no longueurs. What a shame she lived so far away.



That evening he sat with a laptop on his knees, trying to write a report to the works manager at the food wholesaler's while studying the photographs on his mobile. The majority of the shots he had taken of the stolen goods were dark and grainy. He put aside the laptop, fetched a beer and hunkered down in front of a serial on TV, having decided that he would repeat the trip the following day. This time he would be able to make use of the digital Canon and flash he had invested in when he started up his business, but which he hadn't taken many photographs with so far.

## 2

The next day he knew where to go and headed out on the E6 south of Oslo. He maintained a good speed and came off at Vestby, took the Oslo road to Hølen and continued to the slip road onto the R120, where he turned off and drove in the direction of the small-holding. There weren't any cars in the yard today, either. The house seemed just as abandoned. He parked by the bus stop, walked up to the house, stood at the front door and, to be on the safe side, rang the bell. Pushed at the door. Locked. Then he slipped under the tarpaulin covering the opening in the tilting barn. He took some pictures with the proper camera and flash this time. Checked the display to make sure the quality of the photographs was good enough, then got back in the car and drove to the shopping centre.

As soon as he was through the automatic doors he feared he was on a wild-goose chase. The café was packed, and she was nowhere to be seen. But as he turned to leave she appeared behind him and said:



‘Hi. Back again, are you? That’s nice.’

He asked her straight out whether she was doing anything that evening. She was. Presumably she read the disappointment in his eyes because she hastened to ask if he had found the swimming costume he was after. He shook his head. Then she flashed him a smile and said he could go swimming with her at the weekend.

A swim at the beginning of March, he thought, and nodded. Perhaps she was an ice swimmer. He asked where he should pick her up.

‘Just a mo,’ she said, went back to the counter, dealt with a couple of customers and returned a few minutes later with a map she had drawn. She was renting a house in Skjeberg.

‘By the way, my name’s Matilde.’

‘Frank,’ he said, choosing not to mention that most people called him Frankie.

He was keen to hear how she pronounced his name, if they ever got as far as calling each other by their first names, that is.

### 3

On Saturday the rain was falling in sheets. A sombre atmosphere lay over the countryside as he drove his Mini Cooper south. Black tarmac and black ploughed fields stole the light, and the rain collected in small lakes on the biggest of them. Bare branches were outlined against the sky. The ground hadn’t started to send up green shoots, either.

He was going to Skjeberg Bay, not far from Høysand. There were plenty of summer cabins and older detached houses between the rocks. Matilde lived in one of the smallest. It nestled there, with a drive and a handkerchief of a garden behind a white picket fence. As he turned in to park in front of the cabin, the worst of the rain had passed. She was sitting on the terrace in front of the door, barefoot, wearing jeans and a loose sweater. In one hand she held an umbrella, in the other a lit cigarette. Beside her sat a border collie, which meekly stood up to be stroked when he mounted the steps.

They stood smiling at each other for a few seconds.

‘Crap weather,’ he said.

She said nothing, just went in and held the door open.

It was like walking into a room from the 1950s. The sofa looked as if it had been bought from the furniture catalogues of the time, and there was kitsch on the walls: flea-market art – a gipsy girl stretched out on a divan beside a seaman in a sou’wester with a crooked pipe in the corner of his mouth. Above the dining table was a retro wall light with a miniature bulb shining from behind a heart-shaped lampshade. The most modern object in the room was a small Bluetooth speaker on the teak table in front of the sofa. From it came muted country-and-western music. The room had an open kitchen and Matilde was already sashaying between the fridge and the hotplates. The dog sat in front of the wood burner, watching him as he crouched down beside her record collection. Vinyl albums, most of them classics from the golden age. *Every One of Us* by Eric Burdon and the Animals, *Trilogy* by Emerson, Lake & Palmer, B.B. King’s *Live at the Regal* and, further along, gems such as *Exile on Main Street*, *Wave*, *Spectrum* and *Heavy Weather*. The LPs were wedged onto a shelf beside a Tandberg Sølvsuper 10, with inbuilt speakers in a wooden cabinet, and a record-player with a strobe light on the side of the turntable.

He could feel he liked her tastes and the contrasts they created. In addition, he was happy she hadn’t broached the subject of swimming. And he appreciated the way they didn’t have to say everything to each other, which was the same feeling he’d had when they spoke for the first time in the café.

A photograph on the wall showed two ungainly figures on skis, both wearing jeans and anoraks. Both were covered in snow, as if they’d just had a fall.

Matilde turned away from the stove. ‘That’s me and my mum. Neither of us is very good at skiing, but we have such a lot of fun together.’

He sat down on the low sofa.

‘What’s your dog’s name?’

‘Petter,’ she said. ‘It’s actually my mother’s dog, but she has a new partner and he’s allergic.’

Petter rose to his feet and pinned back his ears when he heard his name. Matilde knelt down and stroked him. ‘So that’s why he lives with me.’ She looked up. ‘Hope you’re not allergic to dogs.’

They exchanged glances with an energy that was fuelled by all the layers of the question. ‘No, I’m not,’ he said. ‘Not as far as I know.’

She came over and sat beside him. ‘There’s some coffee on the go,’ she said. ‘Just have to wait a bit.’

The dog laid his head on the floor and looked up at them. Frank leaned back with his eyes closed and took in all the sounds of the room. Water boiling, the noise of the kitchen extractor fan and the faint quiver of a pan lid, the muted C&W music, the crackling of logs in the stove.

He opened his eyes and gazed straight at her, she was resting her head on the back of the sofa, too. They sat looking into each other’s faces. Matilde smiled gently as he took her hand and her sweater crackled with electricity as she moved closer.