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My Friends

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MY FRIENDS

Now I will make an insolent attempt to describe two typical writers in Norway today, if typical writers exist at all. I will talk about persons I know quite well, persons around my own age.

The first person is a sort of male writer. He has been a major influence for some years.

I will call him Mr. Fjatlødal.

He was born, maybe in Oslo, in fact I believe he was born rather in a small district in the countryside of Western Norway, a place for extremely severe and serious attitudes toward life and love—especially toward the latter. His father is probably a fisherman, or perhaps a priest. This young fellow, young Fjatlødal, is sitting on a mountain, dreaming of a better life. In the meantime he is reading Hamsun. He loves Knut Hamsun, or he hates him. One day he runs away from the poor little farm to go to school, high school, college, university. Maybe he fulfills his education—as a psychologist or something like that—maybe he does not.

In any case, he starts to write poems.

He is around twenty-three when his first collection is published. I will guess that his manuscript was refused two or three times. But people from the stony wild coast of Western Norway never give up.

He is now a poet.

His problem is only this: what shall he live on?

If he is a bright boy, and surely he is, he soon becomes a reviewer. And now, with divine youthful courage, he starts to criticize far older colleagues. Perhaps he will also get a job as an advisor in a publishing house. He will get married, most likely to a teacher or a nurse. At this time he is writing novels, essays, plays and short stories. And poems, of course. In a few years he will start a literary magazine. He is using every opportunity to tell people which books are good books, and which are not. Most of the books—the Norwegian ones at least—are not good, according to his taste. And he does not hesitate to tell people.

Around 1970 Mr. Fjatlødal will go through a crisis.

A political crisis. Is it justifiable to write poems about mountains

whistling of far western wind, about twinkling stars, about his stocking-knitting grandma upon her mountain or about sunsets by the fjord or his own dusk of doubt and spleen?

No, it is not.

Times have changed—Paris 1968, the Viet Nam War: the new left-wing movement. He must get out of his ivory tower. He must meet the working class; he must write something about and for the working class.

He tries.

Indeed, he tries. For nearly ten years now he has tried. Rarely does he succeed, for most of his books, in a strange way now, are without blood, without substance, without nerve. But loyally he follows the new and dominating trend: you have to write to the working class.

And he, our poor friend, Mr. Fjatlødal, has almost forgotten this working class. However, he manages to write one brilliant novel, about the poor people he met in his childhood. And this novel is a success; both his critics and his readers love it. In fact, he is still living on that success.

Now I will leave Mr. Fjatlødal for a while and tell you about another writer, his female colleague.

I will call her Miss Andersen.

Miss Andersen was born in Oslo or in another city, not too small. Her parents are ordinary people. She has some vague dreams about being something, but she cannot figure out what.

She is around ten years old when the second world war ends. Now she is going to the cinema as often as she can afford it. She has been watching American movies nonstop for ten years or more. Sometimes she dreams of becoming a movie star.

In a bright moment she finds out that she wants some education, even though her parents don't think it is necessary. She certainly will get married. And certainly she will, probably even before her education is finished. She bears children, one or two, maybe more.

And then she starts to write.

Her writing appears like a slow explosion. She writes and writes; in every free minute of her day, she is writing among noisy children, while her washing machine is churning, even in the middle of the night, she cannot sleep—her characters from her stories are following her, even in bed (especially there).

She writes poems, which she never shows to anybody. She writes a big novel; secretly she sends it to a publisher. The big novel is refused.

But now she cannot stop writing. She writes a new novel. They will print it. At this time she is 27-28 years old.

She goes on. She is writing novels and short stories, maybe some plays for radio. She writes about love, about women, children, nature, cats and dogs and birds, feelings, longing. Many people like her books, some don't. Those serious people on the high mountains of Western Norway will refuse to read her books. They have heard that she even writes about sex, and very little about God.

Miss Andersen never—or most rarely—writes reviews. She does not have time. And rather few editors ask her to do it; they prefer to ask men.

Around 1970 Miss Andersen also comes to a turning point, as well as Mr. Fjatlédal did. Miss Andersen's crisis is of a different sort; the question is: will she become a feminist or will she not?

She will.

At this time the new feminist movement is going to be a movement with great influence. During some years almost everybody is talking about women's liberation, at least they *talk* about it. And the movement is happy to have Miss Andersen along. They will try to tell her what is most important for her—as a female writer—to write about.

Miss Andersen is listening, thinking a little, and writing. She writes about unhappy marriages, unhappy wives, about rapes, abortions, divorces and cruel men. Some of these books are not *really* bad, in fact, many women are deeply influenced by them. And the feminist movement and the feminist critics continue to tell Miss Andersen what she must write about and in which way she ought to do it.

Now something happens inside Miss Andersen. From her own inside, somebody is crying for help. She recognizes the voice of her own creativity—which was nearly strangled.

My story is almost over.

If you want to know more about Mr. Fjatlédal, I can tell you that he is still going strong. He has been a little more humble, and he no longer writes so many books. He has also enjoyed some nice scholarships. His books have changed. One of his latest was chosen as the Book of the Month in the book club. Now he is living with his family in his own house. Maybe he is still a socialist.

And Miss Andersen, she certainly is a feminist all right, but now she prefers—she insists—to write things as *she* feels she must write them. Some of her readers are disappointed, and her feminist critics are not nice to her. It does not matter.

With this presentation of these two writers, I obviously have insulted many of my colleagues—most of them, I am afraid. There are many other writers in Norway, some of them are not interested in either socialism or feminism. But these two trends have been remarkable in Norwegian literature the last ten years. And the results have sometimes been interesting.

In Norway, I probably should mention that you can write whatever you want. Maybe somebody will read what you have written too—if you are lucky.

Today I believe that both Miss Andersen and Mr. Fjatlødal try to write better books than ever. They have both learned something about creativity. I suppose there is more to learn.

By the way, they are both nice people. I like them. They are my friends.